

# Hope amid Despair: Finding Solutions for Rohingya in Bangladesh

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*Cover Photo Caption: Rohingya woman and child in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Photo by Daniel P. Sullivan at Refugees International.*

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## Executive Summary

Around [1 million](#) Rohingya refugees from Myanmar continue to live in the largest refugee settlement in the world in Bangladesh. More than 700,000 of these refugees fled [genocide](#) by the Myanmar military in August 2017. Five years on, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have built up networks of support within the camps with volunteer educators, health workers, and distributors of aid. The people and government of Bangladesh, supported by international donors and humanitarian actors, have provided the Rohingya with food, shelter, and vaccines. But too few solutions have been implemented to address what has become a protracted humanitarian crisis.

Indeed, prolonged displacement and uncertainty about the future of the Rohingya is feeding a growing despair, which recent events and policies have only heightened. The 2021 coup by the Myanmar military (the entity responsible for the genocide against the Rohingya) and increased fighting within Rakhine State (the homeland of the Rohingya) in 2022 make safe return in the near term unlikely. Safety in the camps in Bangladesh has [deteriorated](#) as militant Rohingya groups and criminal gangs increasingly have targeted and killed Rohingya camp leaders. And Bangladeshi policies have [constrained](#) the ability of refugees to pursue formal education and employment opportunities, to move freely, or to form organizations and gather as civil society actors. At the same time, donor fatigue, competing crises, and global economic downturn are projected to lead to significant cuts in humanitarian funding.

Despite the dangerous trends, solutions are emerging that must be cultivated and expanded. Enhancing promising new education and skills-building initiatives is an essential place to start. The government of Bangladesh, supported by international donors, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society must better engage and incorporate the Rohingya community efforts and views toward improved quality education and livelihood opportunities. Other countries, particularly in the region, should explore opportunities to provide Rohingya with access to higher education and temporary work opportunities. The government of Bangladesh must prioritize the safety and security of Rohingya refugees by cracking down on armed and criminal elements and investigating and snuffing out corruption and abuse from some members of the Armed Police Battalions (APBn) and other authorities in the camps. The United States and other countries must also engage the government of Bangladesh about increasing nascent resettlement of the most vulnerable among the refugees and UN agencies must work with Bangladesh to provide further safe houses for those under greatest threat.

For the Rohingya refugees to realize their ultimate goal of safe return to their homeland, the United States and like-minded countries, particularly Myanmar's neighbors, must also address the long-term root causes of the crisis by increasing pressure on the military junta in Myanmar and furthering diplomatic and humanitarian support for opposition groups and civil society within the country.

In the meantime, to stem the tide of hopelessness, and in the interest of sustainable and dignified return in the future, the Rohingya community in Bangladesh must not be restricted, but rather supported and empowered.



# Recommendations

## The government of Bangladesh should:

- **Urgently address the security situation in the camps through enhanced coordination, investigation, and accountability among Bangladeshi law enforcement.** Investigation and apprehension of armed actors in the camps must be improved through enhanced coordination among Bangladeshi law enforcement inside and outside of the camps and through authorization of APBn officers in the camps to directly receive reports from Rohingya and carry out investigations in the camps. Charges of corruption and abuse among the APBn must also be addressed and due process guaranteed for Rohingya detained in mass arrests.
- **Improve protection of Rohingya in the camps through safe houses and enhanced community engagement.** Camp officials must engage the Rohingya community to improve protection measures including the use of unarmed refugees in night patrols or to find alternative solutions. Officials must also provide safe houses outside of the camps to human rights defenders and other Rohingya refugees identified as particularly vulnerable and at risk of attack.
- **Expand access to quality education for Rohingya.** The government should enhance training and recruitment of Rohingya teachers through increased limits on stipends and dedicated capacity-building for female Rohingya teachers. It should support community-based learning initiatives and also allow two-story buildings to be used for schools. The government should provide and facilitate access to higher education for Rohingya refugees both in Bangladesh and abroad through scholarships and online opportunities.
- **Expand livelihood opportunities for Rohingya.** The government should expand programming under the new skills development framework, increase the upper limits of stipends for Rohingya volunteers, expand livelihood opportunities to the main camps, and engage regional governments toward temporary work opportunities for Rohingya.
- **Support and open space for Rohingya civil society.** The government should allow gatherings and provide capacity-building support, official registration, and access to bank accounts and mobile financial services for community-based organizations.
- **Refrain from further movement of refugees to Bhasan Char until ongoing questions of voluntariness and sustainability are properly addressed.** Refugees currently on the island should be provided opportunities to visit or return to the main camps if they choose.
- **Refrain from repatriation of Rohingya to Myanmar until conditions are conducive for safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable returns, in line with international standards.**
- **Scale up resettlement of Rohingya refugees to the United States and other third countries.**

## UN Agencies should:

- **Urge and support the government of Bangladesh to do more to protect refugees and address the insecurity situation within the refugee camps.** UN agencies should expand trainings of APBn and other camp officials on humanitarian protection principles and community safety. They should also work with the government to improve protection services and provide safe houses for human rights defenders and other refugees facing imminent threats.
- **Prioritize commitments on Bhasan Char in meetings with the government of Bangladesh, towards truly voluntary and informed relocations, planning and preparation for potential natural disasters and disruptions of supply lines, and increased opportunities for refugees to return to the main camps.**
- **Engage the government of Bangladesh toward increasing nascent resettlement of Rohingya refugees to third countries and build UN capacity to do so.**
- **Empower Rohingya and improve representation in the camps and on the global stage.** UN agencies should work with the government of Bangladesh to restart and expand the pilot representation program for electing Rohingya camp leaders. Rohingya community representatives should be included in important fora including the Global Refugee Forum.

## The government of the United States and other donor countries should:

- **Engage and support the government of Bangladesh toward improved policies on access to quality education, skills building and livelihood opportunities, freedom of movement, and voluntariness of any further relocations to Bhasan Char.**
- **Sustain and cultivate robust humanitarian support through a global pledging conference.** Donors should maintain robust funding, particularly for psycho-social support, and seek further support through engagement of the private sector and hosting of a global pledging conference for the Rohingya response and broader Myanmar response as was done in 2019.
- **Offer a significant number of resettlement spots to Rohingya in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the region.** The United States should offer to settle at least 50,000 Rohingya in the coming years and urge other countries to enhance that number.
- **Work with like-minded countries, especially in Southeast Asia, to coordinate further pressure on the Myanmar junta to create conditions for safe return of Rohingya.** Key steps include placing a global arms embargo on the junta, additional targeted sanctions on military leaders and military-owned enterprises (including on the oil and gas sectors and entities supplying jet fuel to the junta), support for accountability including the genocide case before the International Court of Justice, and diplomatic and humanitarian support for opposition groups and civil society within Myanmar.

## Research Overview

Refugees International traveled to Bangladesh in October 2022, visiting Dhaka, Cox's Bazar, and the Rohingya refugee camps to assess the humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis and to explore ongoing challenges and possible solutions. This report is informed by dozens of interviews with Rohingya refugees, representatives of UN agencies, donor governments, and local and international non-governmental organizations working on providing humanitarian assistance. It is also informed by and builds upon several Refugees International research trips to Bangladesh, consultations with Rohingya refugees, and prior [reports](#) over recent years.

## Background

Around [1 million](#) Rohingya refugees from Myanmar continue to live in the largest refugee settlement in the world in Bangladesh. Of these, an estimated 200,000-300,000 Rohingya fled decades of persecution prior to 2017, including 36,000 living in camps established in the early 1990s. The majority, however – more than 700,000 – fled [genocidal attacks](#) by the Myanmar military in August 2017. Five years later, the Rohingya refugee crisis now fits what the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) defines as a [protracted](#) crisis.

Another [600,000 Rohingya](#) remain in Myanmar – including more than 100,000 living in camps for internally displaced people since 2012. They face rising threats as fighting increases between the Arakan Army (an ethnic Rakhine armed group) and the military junta. The fighting has at times spilled over the border into Bangladesh with [errant shells killing](#) one Rohingya refugee and injuring several Bangladeshi citizens. This fighting has made the prospects of safe return of Rohingya to their homeland in the near term unlikely. It also underscores the need to address ongoing and growing challenges faced by the million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Over the first five years of the displacement crisis, the government of Bangladesh – supported by international donors, UN agencies, and international and local NGOs – oversaw a robust humanitarian response, providing food, shelter, health and sanitary infrastructure, protection, and other services. But the needs have been immense, requiring [nearly \\$1 billion](#) in humanitarian aid each year. The response has also sought to support the Bangladeshi community near the camps. These communities were already facing high unemployment and poverty rates and have been [adversely affected](#) by the crisis. The Bangladeshi population in the sub-districts hosting the camps is now outnumbered by Rohingya at a 2:1 ratio.

From the start of the crisis, the government of Bangladesh has viewed the stay of Rohingya as temporary. It has resisted any longer-term planning or programming that might allow for integration of Rohingya into Bangladeshi society, insisting on repatriation to Myanmar as the only viable solution. Refugees have not been allowed to work, seek formal education (until recently), nor leave the camps without express permission, usually on medical grounds. In late 2019, Bangladeshi authorities began building barbed wire fencing, which now surrounds the main mega-camp.

Meanwhile, the governance structure in the camps has left the Rohingya with little in terms of a representative voice. With the arrival of new refugees in late 2017, Bangladeshi officials hand-picked local camp leaders, or majhis, without input from the refugees themselves. These majhis





*Snapshot of the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. Photo by Daniel P. Sullivan at Refugees International.*

answer to appointed Bangladeshi officials known as Camps-in-Charge (CiCs) who oversee various parts of the camp. A pilot representation program, in which Rohingya were allowed to elect their own leaders, was tried by UNHCR in one of the camps established in the 1990s, but Bangladeshi authorities have not allowed that to expand.

Finally, in 2020, Bangladeshi authorities began relocating refugees to the island of Bhasan Char – located 37 miles out from the mainland in the Bay of Bengal. Thousands of refugees have now been relocated, despite ongoing questions of informed consent and the safety and sustainability of such moves.



## Current Situation in the Camps in Bangladesh

In October 2022, Refugees International visited the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh and spoke with dozens of refugees, humanitarian workers, and UN and government officials. Efforts to improve conditions in the camps since the first chaotic months are readily observable. Roads and bridges have been reinforced with bricks and concrete drainage. Trees and bushes that had been decimated as refugees sought fuel to burn have been largely reforested. Fires that ravaged the camps, particularly in 2021, have been minimized through better response training and preparation. As one humanitarian official told Refugees International, the Rohingya camps now have the largest refugee voluntary fire response team in the world. Innovations in wastewater treatment and e-vouchers for World Food Program (WFP) markets, allowing greater diversity in food selection, are other noteworthy improvements.

But beneath the surface, several challenges have been percolating, ranging from increased insecurity to a growing sense of despair tied to uncertainty about the future and inability to access educational and livelihood opportunities.

Rohingya refugees, many with family or friends still living in Myanmar, want above all else to return, but recognize that it is not currently safe to do so. One refugee told Refugees International, “I want to be in Myanmar tomorrow. But relatives and friends in Myanmar know no peace.”

Further, Rohingya see little opportunity to provide for themselves and for their children to access quality education, and this is having a direct effect on their mental health. A humanitarian worker involved with psycho-social support in the camps told Refugees International that there has been a shift from the trauma of directly experienced or witnessed atrocities during the genocidal attacks in 2017 to a cumulative trauma based on lack of education opportunities and increased hopelessness.

A sense of despair and lack of opportunity threaten to worsen both mental health and the security situation in the camps. Without more positive alternatives, Rohingya youth are far more vulnerable to turning to negative coping mechanisms ranging from child marriage, human smuggling and trafficking, and involvement in the drug trade to joining gangs or turning to extremist militancy.

Finally, several humanitarian officials raised concerns over the risk of rising tensions between the Rohingya and the host community, especially as the lead up to parliamentary elections in 2023 may incentivize scapegoating of the Rohingya. [Negative narratives](#) of Rohingya refugees have already been prevalent in local and national media and efforts to counter this will be important in the year ahead.

Within this backdrop, refugees and humanitarian workers with whom Refugees International spoke identified a number of ongoing challenges in the camps, but also some promising solutions.

# Main Challenges and Potential Solutions

## Rising Insecurity

### *The Challenge*

The most prevalent concern Rohingya refugees and humanitarian workers in the camps raised during Refugees International's interviews was the rising insecurity within the camps, particularly at night. Attacks on Rohingya by members of the Rohingya militant group the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and rival factions and criminal gangs competing for influence have been on the rise. In the time Refugees International visited Bangladesh, two Rohingya local camp leaders, or majhis, were [killed](#) and another [shot](#) and injured. [At least 17 Rohingya](#) have been killed since mid-August 2022. The motivations behind these attacks are not always clear but appear to be a mix of influence-seeking and retaliation on those seen as informing authorities about illegal activities.

The assassination of prominent civil society leader Mohib Ullah by ARSA in September 2021 is cited by Rohingya refugees as a particular turning point in terms of feelings of insecurity. In the year following, several more Rohingya camp leaders have been attacked or killed, as well as a number of civil society actors. As one refugee told Refugees International, "After one year of Muhib Ullah's assassination, the camp [has] become a war place, and murder by the armed groups in the camp are always happening. The camps are totally unsafe for civilians."

Bangladesh authorities have responded with an increased presence of Armed Police Battalion (APBn) units and have sporadically made [mass arrests](#). These operations have been followed by lulls in attacks. However, Rohingya refugees have also reported corruption and abuse at the hands of some APBn officers and frustration with both innocent people getting caught up in crackdown operations and guilty parties being released after only a short time. Refugees also expressed fear and frustration in being selected to serve in nominally volunteer night patrols set up by camp authorities following the increase in killings of majhis. Those who serve in night patrols are unarmed and understandably feel that such activities put them in danger.

One refugee with whom Refugees International spoke said that his brother had been held hostage by ARSA until his family was able to pay 20,000 Taka, nearly \$200. He continues to receive threats from ARSA, accusing him of informing on them, and has not stayed the night in the camps for five months. "The camp security system is too weak," he said. "APBn is not doing enough to take action against criminals."

The insecurity caused by ARSA and other armed or criminal elements and the reported abuse and extortion by APBn in the camps contribute to a sense of accumulating trauma. A Rohingya photographer in the camps told Refugees International, "We faced the trauma of 2017. Now we are facing persecution by [camp] authorities and our people."

### *Potential Solutions*

These allegations of abuse and corruption and the growing trust deficit stemming from them must be addressed. Bangladeshi authorities have sent in higher level APBn officers but must do more to crack down on criminal activities while also addressing corruption and abuse. Bangladesh should also authorize and empower APBn officers to collect and file reports of violent



crimes directly from refugees and to carry out investigations. Currently, Rohingya must report such crimes to majhis and CiCs before getting permission to leave the camps to officially file a report with police who are authorized to carry out investigations. The Bangladeshi officials in the camps should also ensure that the use and selection process for night patrols or alternative solutions are done in close consultation with the Rohingya community.

UN agencies are seeking to provide trainings for APBn on humanitarian protection principles and community safety and should seek to expand such programs. UNHCR, which leads the protection sector, should work with the government of Bangladesh to further relocate those facing imminent threats to more secure areas in the camps or to safe houses outside of the camps. Another potential solution would be to increase protection by allowing UN actors and international and local NGOs to operate or stay in the camps overnight. Currently, all outside actors are required to leave the camps at the end of each day. This protection by presence, accompanied by security guards, could go a long way in deterring attacks.

## **Lack of Quality Education**

### *The Challenge*

Further contributing to the general growing sense of despair, according to refugees with whom Refugees International spoke, is frustration with a lack of quality education for their children. As one refugee told Refugees International, under educational efforts to date, “Children are not improving and not getting any benefit.”

For most of the first five years of the response, access to education has been limited to informal learning centers run by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and NGO partners. This informal system was based on a curriculum of classes including English, math, Burmese, and life-skills, developed as an emergency measure, and only through the eighth grade level (with [more than 90 percent](#) of children learning at below a third grade level). In January 2020, Bangladesh announced the launch of a [pilot education program](#) based on the official curriculum used inside Myanmar prior to the coup and taught in Burmese. But the launch was delayed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rohingya civil society groups have filled this gap by setting up their own community-based learning centers or in-home private education. These community-based efforts are taught in Burmese or the Rohingya language and range from basic skills and literacy to efforts to follow the formal curriculum in Myanmar.

A growing recognition by Bangladeshi officials of the need to combat the dangers of idle youths growing up in the camps and to prepare for sustainable returns to Myanmar has opened the way for a more formalized education program. The delayed pilot Myanmar curriculum program was finally relaunched in November 2021 and provides a formal, standardized education up to the secondary level (grades six to nine) and expands the number of subjects covered to include science, social studies, and skills training. The program has now reached 248,000 children with aims to reach all of the [more than 400,000 school-aged Rohingya](#) in the next two years.

While the roll out of the Myanmar Curriculum Program has been a welcome initiative, it has already faced several challenges and Rohingya and humanitarians alike question the quality of the

teaching. Rohingya refugees told Refugees International that many of the instructors are unqualified and that what children are learning is too basic. Humanitarian actors cite the difficulty in finding qualified teachers among the Rohingya. Rohingya teachers cite the low stipends offered, especially compared to that of the Bangladeshi instructors they are paired with, and the failure to incorporate informal educational efforts that the Rohingya themselves have been carrying out to fill the gaps over the past five years.

Bangladeshi authorities have also been cracking down on informal education efforts, ordering the closure of Rohingya-run community schools in December 2021 and threatening private instructors. This directive affected an estimated [32,000 students](#) and led to the [closure](#) of several learning centers including the largest, a school of some 600 students founded by the assassinated community leader Mohib Ullah. This crackdown has led to wide-spread angst among Rohingya refugees and undermined overall access to education.

Many refugees told Refugees International they prefer the informal Rohingya-led efforts and question how Rohingya teachers are selected for the formal program. A recent [survey](#) of Rohingya refugees by Save the Children found that just 25 percent thought the quality of education was better than in earlier years of the response, while 40 percent said it was the same, and 32 percent said it was worse. As one Rohingya community volunteer put it, the Myanmar Curriculum Program is “more about quantity than quality.”

For their part, humanitarians involved with the educational efforts complain that it is difficult to find qualified teachers who speak and read Burmese among the Rohingya community. According to a 2020 [survey](#), only 57 percent of households have at least one Burmese-language speaker. Many Rohingya speak only the Rohingya language and were denied educational opportunities in Myanmar. Bangladeshi officials say that the illegal private schools charge students and prevent the more qualified teachers among the Rohingya from joining the Myanmar Curriculum Program. They also cite inequities in access to education through private learning, as it is only accessible for those who can afford it. Bangladeshi authorities want to ensure that teaching does not take place in the Bangla language and warn about alleged dangers of extreme jihadist ideologies being taught through these unmonitored community-based programs.

Another challenge is the lack of space for education. The Myanmar Curriculum requires longer hours than the previously approved educational programs, meaning that it is more difficult to incorporate multiple shifts of students in the limited number of learning centers throughout a day. Finding space in the already densely populated camps is challenging.

Cultural norms and pressures present further challenges for girls’ access to education, as much of the Rohingya community holds conservative views on the education of girls, particularly when mixed with boys. This is accentuated by threats from groups like ARSA against girls who seek education or to volunteer with NGOs. The effects of these pressures and threats are particularly seen as girls get older. Whereas girls are enrolled in learning centers at roughly equal rates to boys at younger ages, the dropout rates for girls [increase](#) as they get older, especially around puberty around ages 12 to 14. UNICEF has set up some girls-only classes as part of the Myanmar curriculum program, but these remain limited as more resources and trained female teachers are needed.

Finally, the Myanmar Curriculum Program faces the challenge of not being accredited and not providing a path to higher education.





*Children's sandals lay outside a shelter serving as a private learning center in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. Photo by Daniel P. Sullivan at Refugees International*

### **Potential Solutions**

In Refugees International's conversations with Rohingya refugees, one of the most cited ways to counter the growing hopelessness was by providing quality education to the Rohingya youth. Such education is seen as a concrete way to prepare the Rohingya community for a better future and to counter influences toward negative coping mechanisms. As one refugee put it, "Solve for education and you solve for ten other problems."

The Myanmar Curriculum Program provides a base from which to build, but steps must be taken to ensure that qualified teachers are found, trained, and prepared. The private education networks set up in the camps should be incorporated into the broader efforts to provide quality education to all Rohingya youth, both through recruitment of the most qualified teachers and as a private supplement to the Myanmar Curriculum classes. As UNICEF has [stated](#), "Private and community-based learning facilities that meet the needs of both boys and girls, and which are operated with sufficient oversight, could also play a role in providing educational services."



This will require adjusting the system to allow for higher stipends for teachers, while allowing teachers to supplement their incomes through private sessions. The new volunteer guidance is raising that monthly stipend from 8,000 Taka to between 10,000 and 15,000 Taka, depending on teaching level, as of November 2022. This is a good start but should be increased further.

While possible inequities for those Rohingya able to afford private lessons versus those who cannot are a concern, the current alternative of denying private education or forcing it to function under the radar, is both a net negative and undermines the ability to monitor private efforts for both quality and risks of extremism. One way to address this would be for Bangladesh to allow Rohingya civil society groups to officially register. They could also be supported to set up accounts with Bangladeshi banks or mobile financial services such as bKash. Both initiatives would help give Bangladesh more oversight over the private schools and address their concerns.

Allowing for some private, community-based learning would also help to alleviate the space challenges already faced by the Myanmar Curriculum Program. Another solution to the space problem would be allowing the use of two-story buildings in the camps, something that Bangladeshi authorities have been reluctant to do so far.

Allowing for more girls-only classes, providing more learning centers closer to girls' households, and prioritizing the training and recruitment of women teachers could help to address the cultural challenges. Donors should also continue to support community outreach efforts to push back on negative views of women and practices like child marriage and gender-based violence that remain major challenges for women and girls in the camps.

Finally, to address the lack of access to higher education, the United States and other countries, including those in the region, should engage Bangladesh to provide scholarship programs and allow for access for Rohingya to attend universities abroad or to access higher education through online courses. The question of accrediting the Myanmar Curriculum Program will be more challenging as long as the military junta continues its coup in Myanmar. But other countries could recognize the program for the purposes of pursuing higher education. Myanmar's opposition groups, including the National Unity Government, should also commit to recognizing and accrediting the program for when Rohingya refugees are able to return to their homeland.

## **Lack of Livelihood Opportunities**

### *The Challenge*

Alongside lack of education, the lack of livelihood opportunities is among the most cited reasons for growing despair among Rohingya refugees. As one refugee told Refugees International, one of the most effective ways to improve people's lives in the camp would be "permitting refugees to do business in the camp to support their respective families."

Bangladeshi officials view the stay of Rohingya refugees as temporary and fear allowing Rohingya to work will lead to their integration into Bangladesh for the long term. Officials also do not want Rohingya to compete for work with Bangladeshis near the camps who face high unemployment rates and levels of poverty.



*Rohingya refugee transporting supplies in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. Photo by Daniel P. Sullivan at Refugees International*

As a result, official livelihood opportunities have, until very recently, been barred, with legal opportunities to earn income [limited](#) to some cash-for-work activities and small stipends for volunteer work with UN agencies and NGOs in the camps. These include carrying supplies, shelter construction and repair, desludging latrines, and community outreach on health, monsoon preparedness, and other issues. Unofficially, many Rohingya have set up shops in or near the camps. Others have found ways, often through payment of bribes, to get through the barbed wire fencing to work as day laborers in nearby fields or as domestic workers. However, each of these carry risks of detention, extortion, or loss. For example, at the end of 2021, Bangladeshi officials [destroyed](#) more than 3,000 Rohingya-run shops and continue to do so on a semi-regular basis.

In its reluctance to allow anything that hints at integration of Rohingya, the government of Bangladesh has also rejected possible funding. In July 2021, the Bangladesh foreign ministry [denounced](#) a World Bank proposal to offer funding tied to one of its mechanisms for countries hosting refugees and people in refugee-like situations. At question was the Bank's broader guidance, not specific to Bangladesh, that mentioned efforts to allow refugees freedom of movement throughout a host country, the right to purchase property, and access to public education and the labor market. While the World Bank has [funded](#) several efforts related to provision of basic





*Model boats traditionally used by Rohingya in Myanmar shown at the Rohingya Cultural Memory Center in the camps in Bangladesh. Photo by Daniel P. Sullivan at Refugees International.*

services and building disaster and social resilience for Rohingya refugees, as well as several that support the host community, Bangladesh's stance on refugee-related funding mechanisms is preventing potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in additional assistance.

The one place where Bangladesh has allowed for true livelihood activities is on Bhasan Char. Bangladesh has said that it will allow fishing, farming, cattle raising, and other activities on the island. This can be understood partially because there are no local host communities with which to compete on the island, but also because it is in Bangladesh's interest to attract refugees to come to the island and to entice international donors to support these relocations. To date, these opportunities have remained limited, and their sustainability remains in question. For example, Rohingya are not allowed to fish beyond the island's shores, and it is unclear how needed supplies will reach the island, which so far is only serviced by Navy boats.

### *Potential Solutions*

The government of Bangladesh's approval in late 2022 of a new skills development framework and guidance on volunteer stipends has created an opening. The framework – a copy of which was seen by Refugees International – aims to provide Rohingya with skills that can be applied



to future work upon return to Myanmar or, in other words, to prepare Rohingya for sustainable return and reintegration in Myanmar. But it also recognizes the need to mitigate risks during the Rohingya's stay in Bangladesh by providing opportunities for an otherwise idle population. The framework is also meant to mitigate the effects of the crisis on the host community, by offering Bangladeshis living near the camps enhanced employment and entrepreneurial skills.

Among the activities mentioned for support for Rohingya are kitchen and homestead gardening, chicken and turkey rearing, and training in electrical maintenance, plumbing, tailoring, and production of soap and dairy products. The framework also aims to expand some livelihood activities already begun on Bhasan Char, including fishing, livestock rearing, and gardening.

Notably the framework allows for UN agencies and NGOs to provide allowances to Rohingya refugees participating in such projects. The guidance on volunteer stipends aims to establish consistency in what volunteers receive as stipends across the camps and provides for slight increases from earlier established levels. Monthly stipends range from 8,000 Taka (roughly \$80) for unskilled volunteers to 13-15,000 Taka (roughly \$130-150) for skilled volunteers (e.g. assistant teachers/trainers, head teachers/trainers). However, such opportunities remain limited.

The activities identified in the skills building framework should be rapidly rolled out and expanded. At the same time, Bangladeshi authorities should refrain from activities that constrain what little additional opportunities to earn for themselves the refugees have at their disposal. They should, for example, allow shops, or at least refrain from destruction of shops in the camps even if unofficial. UN agencies and donor countries should encourage Bangladesh to allow the same livelihood opportunities offered on Bhasan Char in the main camps.

International financial institutions and private sector actors should engage Bangladesh on economic projects that will benefit both the host community and Rohingya refugees. As has been [recommended](#) by the Center for Global Development, there are several activities that governments, international financial institutions, and private companies can offer, if allowed, including trade incentives, infrastructure investment, and development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to provide employment for the host community and refugees. Finally, other countries, particularly in the region, should look to offer temporary work opportunities for the Rohingya, particularly in fields such as farming and fishing that they pursued while in Myanmar.

## **Restrictions on Freedom of Movement and Civil Society**

### *The Challenge*

Over time, restrictions on freedom of movement have increased, with refugees telling Refugees International that they now have difficulty in gaining permission even to move within the camps. Several Rohingya refugees told Refugees International about having to pay bribes to camp authorities for being caught moving without permission. And as one refugee told Refugees International, "We can't travel to Cox's Bazar [town] except for medical reasons. Even moving block to block [in the camp] can lead to harassment, beatings, arrests, and extortion."

One of the more positive aspects of the Rohingya humanitarian response was the growth of a robust civil society among the refugees. Repressed and persecuted within Myanmar, refugees found new space in the camps in Bangladesh to meet, discuss how to address community chal-

lenges, and organize toward a better future. Hundreds, if not thousands, of groups were formed focusing on a range of issues, from basic education to women's empowerment.

At the height of this civil society growth, a group known as the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH) organized a [rally of thousands](#) of refugees to mark the second anniversary since the genocidal attacks that forced most of the Rohingya population to flee to Bangladesh. While the rally featured calls for justice and for the ability of Rohingya to return to Myanmar – all messages with which Bangladeshi authorities whole-heartedly agreed – the size of the rally and prospect of refugees getting more organized was portrayed in the media as a security threat and led to a backlash. ARSPH's headquarters was [locked up](#), and Bangladeshi intelligence officers began monitoring and listening in on meetings between ARSPH and other groups and foreign visitors. Since that time, civil society has been much more closely monitored and restricted or even co-opted by Bangladeshi intelligence to emphasize their own interests. For example, a large rally in June 2022 and similar gatherings to mark the fifth Rohingya genocide remembrance day in August 2022 featured “Going Home” messages [reportedly](#) encouraged and orchestrated by intelligence officials, including the provision of poster materials and suggested messages to emphasize support for Rohingya repatriation as soon as possible.

ARSA and its factions, along with rival criminal gangs operating in the camps, have also targeted civil society leaders – including assassinated ARSPH leader Mohib Ullah – seen as endangering their influence or informing on their activities. As one Rohingya civil society leader told Refugees International, “people who speak up for the community are not safe. Those who take initiative of leadership are targeted.”

### *Potential Solutions*

Despite the risks, a number of Rohingya civil society actors continue their efforts and advocacy, whether in partnership with UN agencies and NGOs or via Whatsapp and Signal groups. They work to educate Rohingya youth, empower women, pursue accountability for the atrocity crimes committed against the Rohingya, and raise awareness about hygiene, gender-based violence, and child marriage. These groups hold the key to a better future for the Rohingya community and must be protected, supported, and empowered. Supporting them will both help to improve current conditions in the camps and facilitate sustainable return of Rohingya to Myanmar when it is safe.

In addition to the efforts needed to improve security mentioned above, camp officials, UN agencies, and NGOs should seek to build the capacity of Rohingya civil society actors through training and funding of activities. Rohingya-led community-based organizations could be better supported through official registration in Bangladesh that would allow them to hold bank accounts and to receive funding directly from donors. As one Rohingya man told Refugees International, “If we have to stay in the camps, we at least want to be independent. Allow teachers to teach. Allow us to raise the voice of the community.”

Rohingya-led research initiatives should also be supported. For example, a recently released [report](#) on threats to Rohingya language, culture, and identity in Myanmar and Bangladesh, was carried out by a team of Rohingya researchers based in the camps in Bangladesh. Donors should seek to fund similar Rohingya-led research and advocacy efforts.

UN agencies and donors should also engage Bangladeshi officials toward restarting and expanding the [pilot representation program](#), which replaced Rohingya camp leaders selected by





*A Rohingya woman civil society leader in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Photo by Daniel P. Sullivan at Refugees International.*

Bangladeshi authorities with those elected by the Rohingya community. Once leaders are identified, they should be included in important meetings discussing the future of the Rohingya community in Dhaka and globally. In the meantime, UN agencies should seek to include community representatives in such meetings as the [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\)](#), an international gathering of States and other actors aimed at raising financial support and identifying best practices for refugee response. The first GRF took place in 2019 with the passage of the Global Compact on Refugees, and the second GRF will take place in 2023.

## Bhasan Char

### The Challenge

Another recurring concern raised by Rohingya refugees and humanitarian actors in the camps is the relocation of refugees to a remote island in the Bay of Bengal known as Bhasan Char. The government of Bangladesh had long spoken about the idea of developing the island to host





*Rohingya refugees at a distribution center in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Photo by Daniel P. Sullivan at Refugees International.*

Rohingya refugees but accelerated plans following the sudden increase of refugees starting in August 2017. It has spent at least \$300 million to build embankments and concrete housing to ensure the safety of the island for refugees. Bangladeshi authorities [first moved](#) a small group of Rohingya caught fleeing the main camps by sea to the island in April and May 2020, then began more formal relocations in December 2020. Bangladesh has now moved some 30,000 refugees to the island, claiming the moves to be voluntary. However, hundreds of refugees have [attempted to flee](#) the island, calling this into question.

Human rights and refugee advocacy groups, including Refugees International, have long [raised questions](#) about the safety and sustainability of moving refugees to the island, without satisfactory answers. International donor countries, UN agencies, and NGOs have [expressed](#) similar concerns. Eventually, UN agencies were able to visit and carry out limited assessments. In October 2021, UNHCR signed a [memorandum of understanding \(MoU\)](#) with the government, in which the government committed to voluntariness and informed consent of any relocations to the island and the ability of refugees to return to the main camps for limited occasions, such as weddings and funerals. The government has also set up livelihood opportunities on the island that are not available to refugees in the main camps, including fishing and farming. Bangladeshi authorities



also began providing limited transport for refugees to return to the camps and arranging go-and-see visits for refugees in the main camps to see the island before deciding to relocate there.

Since the signing of the MoU, observers told Refugees International that the process for informing refugees about the island and monitoring voluntariness has improved. Many Rohingya who choose to move to the island are motivated by the more stable shelters and the relative safety of the island compared to the rising insecurity in the camps. However, many Rohingya refugees continue to report false information and coercive pressures to move to the island. Refugees with whom Refugees International spoke described pressure exerted by Bangladeshi security and camp authorities on majhis leading to offers of money to volunteers and threats to confiscate ration cards if a quota of volunteers is not reached. And only [around 1,500 refugees](#) have been able to return to the main camps for visits, all dependent on transport by the Bangladeshi navy. Refugees International spoke by phone to a Rohingya man who was among the first thousand refugees on the island. He said that, at the beginning, he felt good and that the government was doing better for him, but now, nearly two years later, he felt “the government wanted to tie us up without rope.”

By 2022, UN agencies were able to carry out a needs assessment and identified serious concerns about the health and nutrition situation on the island, finding high malnutrition rates and inadequate health facilities. Recognizing the humanitarian imperative to help the refugees, the United States and other donors agreed to provide funding for limited life-saving aid including for food security, protection, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene efforts.

## Potential Solutions

Even as international donors and NGOs are compelled by the humanitarian imperative to provide life-saving assistance to those already relocated to the island, they must make clear that future support that goes beyond emergency needs, will depend on Bangladesh living up to its own commitments. These commitments include truly voluntary and informed relocations, provision of Myanmar curriculum education and livelihood activities, and planning and preparation for potential natural disasters and disruptions of supply lines to the island. Refugees should also have increased opportunities to visit the main camps, or to return permanently, should they so choose.

Donor and UN engagement with Bangladesh on Bhasan Char must also include pushes for generally improved conditions for Rohingya, including access to health care, quality education, and livelihood opportunities both on the island and in the main camps.

## Looming Funding Cuts

### The Challenge

Humanitarian workers in Bangladesh are concerned about likely cuts in funding for aid to the Rohingya. The prolonged nature of the crisis, paired with greater global humanitarian needs and negative economic factors make it unlikely that international donors will continue to fund the Rohingya response at the levels of recent years.

The appeals of the [Joint Response Plan \(JRP\)](#), which provides an annual roadmap for matching funds with needs, called for more than [\\$900 million](#) annually between 2018 and 2021. These appeals have been funded at between 65 and 75 percent each of those years. In 2022, the appeal was reduced slightly to \$881 million and, as of November 2022, had only been funded at [43 percent](#).

UN agencies and NGOs recognize these trends and are taking steps to consolidate and improve the efficiency of their efforts. For example, the number of medical facilities in the camps has been reduced based on analysis of distance and overlapping services. Similar consolidation measures are planned for various sectors of the response. However, NGOs have raised concerns about the transparency of the process and resulting greater control by UN agencies at the expense of international and local NGOs.

But with nearly 1 million refugees dependent on aid, consolidation can only go so far. Humanitarian officials, for example, warn about the impact of diminished funding for liquid petroleum gas (LPG) used by refugees to cook within their shelters. Massive deforestation – that was the result of refugees’ initial use of trees for shelter materials and cooking fires – has been successfully rolled back with efforts to “re-green” the camps. Today much of the plant-life has been regrown, but as soon as LPG is no longer available, refugees will turn to whatever sources of fuel they can find. Similarly, food aid can only be cut so much before malnutrition rates rise.

## Potential Solutions

International donors must not forget the need of the Rohingya and the rapid deterioration that will result from aid cuts. Those currently supporting the response must sustain robust financial commitments while engaging other donors to do the same. The United States, as the leading donor to the response, should work with like-minded countries to host a global pledging conference for the Rohingya response and broader Myanmar response as was [done in 2019](#).

Until Rohingya can return safely to their homeland, the most effective way to support the humanitarian response and reduce the need for aid in Bangladesh is to increase the self-reliance of Rohingya refugees in the camps. Taking the steps mentioned earlier in this report to expand education, skills-building, and livelihood opportunities would help to create a more self-sustaining situation in the camps. The United States and other countries must engage the Bangladeshi government to take these steps.

In the meantime, beyond aid, the most impactful action that can be done to ameliorate the situation in the camps would be to process vulnerable Rohingya for resettlement to third countries. In December 2022, the United States [announced](#) the establishment of a resettlement program for the most vulnerable Rohingya refugees, but the initial reported [numbers](#) were small. In an earlier [report](#), Refugees International suggested resettlement of at least 50,000 refugees by the United States over several years as a reasonably attainable number, but the United States should work with allies to aim higher. Resettlement will not be a solution for the vast majority of Rohingya in Bangladesh, but it will make all the difference in individual lives and may also help in other ways. As one Rohingya refugee said, resettlement will allow more Rohingya to speak freely and raise awareness of our situation on the global stage.



## Conclusion

Solutions to the protracted crisis in the Bangladesh camps all require empowerment of the Rohingya. Donors and humanitarian actors must work with the government of Bangladesh to ensure that the more positive solutions begun are expanded and not undermined by counter-productive actions. The ultimate solution to the crisis will be the safe return of Rohingya to their homeland. This will require increased global coordination of pressure on the Myanmar junta. But until this is realized, protecting and empowering Rohingya in Bangladesh is the best way to reduce dependency on international aid, to counter rising despair, to prevent further insecurity, and to prepare for sustainable return in the future.

## About the Author

**Daniel P. Sullivan** is the director for Africa, Asia, and the Middle East at Refugees International.

## About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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