

Rohingya refugees face appalling conditions in Bangladesh

By Wimal Perera
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In contrast to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's propaganda about the "humanitarian treatment" given to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, they are living in miserable conditions in make-shift camps.

Because of the deep-felt sympathy of the ordinary masses for the Burmese refugees, the Hasina government pretends it is looking after them well. However, it is seeking to push them back into Burma as soon as possible.

Rohingya people, an oppressed Muslim minority, have lived for generations in Burma's northwestern Rakhine state. In 1982, the Burmese regime stripped away their citizenship rights.

More than 622,000 refugees have entered Bangladesh since the Burmese military stepped up its violent attacks in August, triggering a mass exodus from Rakhine state. An estimated 834,000 refugees are living in Bangladesh, including those who fled earlier.

Though the Bangladesh government tried to block the refugees by military means, it was later forced by sheer weight of numbers to allow the mass exodus. Refugees were tortured, women raped, houses torched and villages destroyed in what amounts to "ethnic cleansing" by the Burmese military and its associated gangs.

The refugees are crammed in unhealthy and unplanned squalid camps at Cox's Bazar, 400 kilometers south of Dhaka and close to the border with Rakhine state. The refugees are short of clean water, sanitary facilities, health care and food.

Aid worker Kym Blechynden, speaking to the media on November 21, described the situation at one refugee camp, the Kutapalong camp located in Cox's Bazar. "Steep hillsides are covered in makeshift homes closely packed together like a jigsaw and built with pride from bamboo and tarpaulins," she said. "There is no space

left untouched, as far as the eye can see."

Blechynden said: "We see more than 150 patients a day in each clinic; malnourished children and adults, people suffering from dangerous diarrhoea and respiratory infections."

The conditions inside the camp are appalling. There are no roads in the camps, only steep muddy tracts. With torrential rain, the situation becomes worse.

With thousands more people coming across the border, the situation will continue to deteriorate.

The overwhelming majority of refugees are women and children. One media report noted the plight of two small children less than two years of age, listless in their mother's arms. Dying of thirst, they were revived by dropping water with sugar into their mouths. Many refugees are in this state.

Many children are traumatised by their experiences. Rabea, a six-year-old girl, said she was standing with her siblings when a soldier shot her father in the head. "Blood flowed from his ears, his body dropped lifeless to the ground ... Her mother was shot soon after," the *Daily Star* reported.

Rabea's aunt, who cares for her, said Rabea cries at night, and spends her days roaming through the camp, unable to understand what happened.

Child protection specialist Graner Marak with World Vision said: "With the horrors they have gone through, it is difficult to say if they can recover. Children have seen killings and atrocities and this will take time to process."

Another doctor said most girls are "rape survivors." He said his clinic treated 3,000 to 5,000 refugees daily, many of them children, for numerous diseases, including waterborne diseases like cholera and diarrhea.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO),

62 percent of the water available to the refugees is contaminated with E. coli, an indicator for measuring faecal contamination. UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) spokesperson Christophe Bouliercac said: "We are also concerned by an increase in cases of acute watery diarrhoea (AWD) which has included several deaths." Between 25 August and 11 November, a total of 36,096 AWD cases were reported, including 10 related deaths. Reportedly, there is only one toilet per 327 refugees.

Malnutrition has developed to life-threatening levels. UNICEF and its partners screened a total of 59,604 children as of October 25. They identified 1,970 or 3.3 percent as "severely acutely malnourished" and 6,971 or 12 percent as "moderately acutely malnourished."

One refugee leader told the UNHCR team: "When it rains, the rain comes down from the hills behind, and during the high tides, the water comes from that side." He said the water often reached knee height, saturating their shelters.

To try to survive, refugees are engaged in work such as pulling rickshaws, fishing, making bricks or working in nearby salt fields.

On September 12, Prime Minister Hasina visited the Kutupalong refugee camp to put on a show of sympathy. She hugged refugees and lamented the deaths of women and children. Hasina told reporters: "We gave them shelter in our country on humanitarian grounds."

Likewise, Bangladesh Foreign Minister A. H. Mahmood Ali accompanied a delegation of three foreign ministers from Germany, Sweden and Japan.

Meanwhile, Hasina's government is biometrically registering all the refugees to monitor their movements. It is desperate to send back hundreds of thousands of people, despite the atrocities they face in Burma.

On November 23, Foreign Minister Mahmood Ali and Burmese minister U Kyaw Tint signed an agreement to repatriate Rohingya. It is based on a pact signed in 1992 to send back refugees who fled Burmese military violence.

According to the terms, Aung San Suu Kyi's Burmese government will accept only those who can produce official identity papers. However, many of the refugees have no such documents because they escaped from the country while facing ruthless repression.

The refugees are refusing to return. Reuters reported

one refugee, Salimullah, saying: "We will go back to our country if our demands are met. Our demands are that we are given citizenship. They also have to give us back our land.

The Bangladesh government is violating the basic rights of refugees. The international powers are equally two-faced in their pretences of concern. The European countries have violently blocked refugees who fled the wars in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries.

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