

Hundreds of Rohingya refugees stranded in Bay of Bengal

By Rohantha De Silva
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The Bangladesh government revealed on Friday that its navy rescued about 280 Rohingyas from the Bay of Bengal and dispatched them to an island where they have been subjected to COVID-19 quarantining. The news was released after about 40 people, including starving women and children, came ashore in Bangladesh on May 2.

The *Washington Post* reported on May 9 that there are still hundreds of refugees at sea on three or four boats somewhere between Bangladesh and Malaysia. The Malaysian and Bangladeshi governments are denying them entry, citing coronavirus concerns.

The Rohingyas were attempting to reach Malaysia in a bid to escape the appalling conditions they face in Bangladesh and in the hope of finding work as undocumented labourers. The refugees had to pay \$US700 per head to traffickers, a huge sum for these poverty-stricken people, for the dangerous journey.

While it is not clear how many remain stranded on overcrowded boats in the Bay of Bengal, the media is reporting that somewhere between several dozen and 100 could have died in the sea.

Reuters wrote on May 3, “The survivors described hundreds of men, women, and children crammed on the boat, unable to move, squatting in rain and scorching sun until, as food and water ran out, they began to die of starvation, thirst and beatings, their bodies tossed overboard. Some wept as they spoke.”

Reminiscent of conditions on the old slave transport ships, the *New York Times* said that the “Rohingya women and children are packed together so tightly in the darkened hold that they can barely stretch out.”

The Awami League-led government in Bangladesh is determined to block the refugees from re-entering the country. Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen, in response to Human Rights Watch (HRW) calls for

Dhaka to provide the refugees with the necessary food, water, and health-care, told *Al Jazeera* late last month that the Rohingya people were not Bangladesh’s responsibility.

The plight of the Rohingyas stranded in the Bay of Bengal has become commonplace over the last few months. HRW reported that it has spoken to 10 families who said family members had disappeared after leaving refugee camps.

A mother from the Kutupalong camp explained, “One of my sons left the camp some two months ago. Around 20 days back, I got a phone call from my son to pay money to smugglers. We paid. But we have not heard anything since.”

The Rohingya are a persecuted Muslim community from north-western Burma (Myanmar) who have faced massacres, rape and the destruction of whole villages at the hands of the Burmese military and Buddhist supremacists.

Currently there are more than one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, having fled Burma since August 2017 in the expectation that they would be sympathetically treated by the government of a Muslim majority country. These hopes were quickly dashed.

Despite widespread sympathy for the refugees by the Bangladeshi masses, Dhaka tried to block the refugees by using the military. The government of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina treats the refugees as an unbearable burden and wants to send hundreds of thousands to Bhasan Char, a cyclone-prone island in the Meghna River.

The government has built small concrete breeze-block rooms of 2m x 2.5m, with small barred windows on the remote silt island, which is only accessible by boat. Fearing they will be forced into the terrible conditions on this island, refugees have been

trying to escape by boat to Malaysia since late last year.

Totally abandoned by the Hasina government, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are desperate. As Mohammad Yusuf, a chief imam, explained, “I feel like crying, realising the situation of my brothers and sisters who are still floating in the deep sea.”

The already appalling situation facing the almost 900,000 Rohingyas refugees in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar—the most densely overcrowded refugee camp in the world—is worsening as the coronavirus spreads through Bangladesh.

There are currently 14,657 officially confirmed virus cases in Bangladesh and 228 deaths. Although no one in the Cox’s Bazar camp has as yet been infected, 13 cases have been reported in the district and one near the camp. “A large-scale outbreak is highly likely” in the overcrowded camp, researchers at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health have warned.

Canada’s *Globe and Mail* reported on May 4, that the camp is so densely packed that it is not uncommon for a family of seven or eight to live in a 110-square-foot room. Another report noted that Rohingyas are sleeping on muddy plastic sheets or paper in flimsy canvas and bamboo shelters. Water supply, sanitation, and sewage facilities are completely inadequate. Cholera, chickenpox and diphtheria infection have broken out in the camps since 2017.

“If anyone of us is infected by this virus, many refugees will die in a short time,” one refugee, Ro Ro Yassin Abdumonab, told reporters. With 40,000 people living in each square kilometre, a disaster is inevitable.

The UNHCR has established one isolation facility to treat 200 infected people and another to treat 50. It is also planning to have 10 beds with ventilators and intensive-care capacity. The *Globe and Mail* reported that it will take two weeks to complete but a UNHCR spokeswoman in Cox’s Bazar admitted that “it’s not much in the way of resources” and “very limited.”

Bangladesh’s government used the pandemic to impose a “complete lockdown” in Cox’s Bazar on April 9. The measure came on top of the already existing crackdown on the refugee camps, including tight curfews, the closure of shops run by refugees, the blocking of internet services and the confiscation of mobile phones.

It had already banned refugees from leaving the camps and warned employers not to hire them. Under

various bogus pretexts, the government had previously banned more than 40 non-government organizations providing relief work for the refugees. This means that the Rohingya refugees are now totally dependent on the World Food Program and other charity for basic necessities.

The Rohingyas are neglected not just by the Bangladeshi ruling class but all major powers, who, despite their hypocritical promises to help these poverty-stricken stateless people, provide very little assistance and refuse to allow them to enter their countries, thus condemning hundreds to die at sea.

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