



Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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What's new? With no near-term prospect of returning to Myanmar, almost a million Rohingya refugees in camps in Bangladesh face an uncertain future. An impressive aid operation has stabilised the humanitarian situation; attention must now turn to refugees' lives and future prospects, in particular improved law and order and education for children.

Why does it matter? A lack of security and hope creates major risks. Militants and gangs increasingly operate with impunity in the camps, consolidating control to the detriment of non-violent political leaders. Without education opportunities, children will be left ill equipped to thrive wherever they live in the future.

What should be done? Bangladesh should institute an effective police presence in the camps and bring the perpetrators of crimes to justice. It should also lift its ban on formal education in the camps. If it does, donors should help meet the costs of these and other measures to improve refugees' lives.

I. Overview

Eighteen months on from the mass expulsion of 740,000 Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh, no sustainable solution for the refugees is in sight. Repatriation to Myanmar should remain the long-term goal – not only to relieve the huge burden on Bangladesh but also because that is the strong preference of the refugees themselves. But the unfortunate reality is that Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh will be unable to return home to Myanmar for the foreseeable future. Systems are now largely in place to provide for their essential humanitarian needs in the sprawling refugee camps. It is now time to move beyond the emergency phase of managing this crisis. Shifting focus in this way requires Bangladesh to ease its restrictions on longer-term assistance. Specifically:

- The Bangladesh government should lift its ban on the provision of formal education in the camps; local and international organisations are ready to provide such education.

- ❑ It should also improve law and order in the camps, where militants and gangs increasingly operate with impunity and are consolidating control to the detriment of non-violent political voices and leaders. This requires instituting a regular and effective Bangladeshi police presence in the camps and investigating crimes and bringing perpetrators to justice.
- ❑ For their part, donors should help Bangladesh not only to meet the refugees' immediate humanitarian needs but also to cover the costs of measures that improve their lives and prospects for the future.

II. Slim Prospects for Return

The Myanmar security forces' mass expulsion of Rohingya starting in August 2017 created a major humanitarian emergency in neighbouring Bangladesh and the largest refugee settlement in the world.¹ Around one million Rohingya, from this and previous exoduses, live in a cluster of densely populated camps in Cox's Bazar district, as well as some in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Some eighteen months on from the main exodus, a major humanitarian operation by local and international aid groups has successfully addressed the immediate priorities. Life-saving essentials – food, water, sanitation, shelter and basic health services – are now in place. As the monsoon season looms, the camps are much better prepared this year than before: drainage has been improved and roads through the camps have been surfaced. But there are limits to what can be done to mitigate risk in such densely packed camps carved out of former forest and where there are almost no flat areas. A heavy monsoon (unlike last year's unusually mild one) could still take a serious toll, and a cyclone – a relatively frequent event in this region – would be devastating.

There is no prospect that the refugees will be able to return home to Myanmar's Rakhine State any time soon. The Myanmar authorities still have not addressed the fundamental issues of Rohingyas being denied citizenship, freedom of movement, security and other basic rights. Fighting between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army – a militant outfit that draws its support mainly from the ethnic Rakhine population (a mostly Buddhist group distinct from the Rohingya Muslims) – has escalated sharply since January.² The fighting has affected remaining Rohingya communities, both because they are caught between the warring parties and sometimes find themselves in the crossfire, and because of the uncertainty and fear that fighting

¹ This briefing is based on an April 2019 visit by Crisis Group to Dhaka and the Cox's Bazar refugee camps, including interviews with refugee leaders, humanitarian agencies and local analysts. For more background on the situation of the Rohingya, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 296, *The Long Haul Ahead for Myanmar's Rohingya Refugee Crisis*, 16 May 2018; 292, *Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase*, 7 December 2017; 283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December 2016; 261, *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, 22 October 2014; and 251, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*, 1 October 2013; and Asia Briefing N°153, *Bangladesh-Myanmar: The Danger of Forced Rohingya Repatriation*, 12 November 2018.

² See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°154, *A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 24 January 2019.

brings. This creates a further impediment to the refugees' return. The conflict also has pushed repatriation down the list of priorities in Naypyitaw, which is currently focused on the Arakan Army insurgency and national elections in 2020.

III. Fraught Conditions in the Camps

The likelihood that the refugees will remain in Bangladesh for years requires that attention now turn to their medium-term prospects. A key priority is education. The Bangladesh government currently prohibits the provision of formal education to the refugees. This restriction robs families of their hope for a more economically secure future and ensures that a generation of children will be deprived of the skills they will need to flourish, wherever they ultimately live.

Informal private "tuitions" held in private dwellings and networks of madrassas that only teach the Koran do not adequately fill the formal education gap.³ No evidence has emerged of these madrassas promoting violence or intolerance among children, or of indoctrination or recruitment by local or transnational jihadists. However, a policy of denying young people formal education and leaving them reliant on unregulated madrassas almost certainly increases the risks of such groups gaining a foothold in the camps.⁴ Already, the Chittagong-based Islamist movement Hefazat-e-Islam – which has publicly called for jihad against Myanmar – has considerable influence over the madrassa network in the camps, through the funding and religious scholars that it provides.⁵

Equally concerning is the lack of law and order. One prominent refugee leader described the security situation as "very serious", saying he was "unable to sleep at night" for fear of attack.⁶ A determined and often violent struggle is currently underway for de facto control of the camps. At stake is informal political authority over a huge population and access to lucrative economic rents from the camp economy – both licit and illicit – through corruption and extortion. The groups vying for control include the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) militant group, which has shown that it is willing to deploy deadly violence to further its aims; informal networks of religious leaders; non-violent political and civil society groups; and a random assortment of criminal gangs.

Violent groups operate freely in the camps. As evening draws in and humanitarian workers withdraw to their bases in Cox's Bazar town, security is in the hands of untrained and unarmed night watchmen appointed from among the refugees. Overstretched Bangladeshi police are focused on perimeter security and protection of local Bangladeshi communities and remain mostly outside the camps at night. Refu-

³ Crisis Group interviews, refugee leaders and humanitarian agencies, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, April 2019.

⁴ Bangladeshi officials also cite this as a risk. See "Delayed repatriation risks breeding Rohingya terrorists: Bangladesh official", *The Irrawaddy*, 24 April 2019.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, journalists and analysts, Dhaka and Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, April 2019. For more details on Hefazat-e-Islam, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°295, *Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 28 February 2018. On the calls for jihad, see "Hefazat: Jihad against Myanmar if Rohingya killing continues", *Dhaka Tribune*, 15 September 2017.

⁶ Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee leader, refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, April 2019.

gees express serious concerns about their personal security, and militants and gangs are intimidating, kidnapping and killing with impunity.⁷ Murders and other forms of violence are an almost nightly occurrence; the police rarely investigate, and perpetrators have almost never been brought to justice.⁸

This creates a toxic political environment within the camps. Without basic security, non-violent political actors face intimidation or worse. For example, ARSA was likely responsible for the grisly murder of Arif Ullah, a camp leader, in June 2018 – based on the manner of his killing which is typical of ARSA (a deep knife cut to the throat) and the fact that death threats typical of ARSA had been circulating against him on WhatsApp, accusing him of being too close to the Bangladesh army.⁹ Some refugee leaders to whom Crisis Group spoke in April 2019 had received credible death threats, they believe from ARSA, and fear for their lives.¹⁰ Amid the lawlessness, violent actors are likely to further consolidate control, which will stifle peaceful political organisation among the refugees and constructive debate about how to shape their own futures. Effective control of the camps will pass to those who prioritise accumulation of power or wealth, or militant agendas, over the future well-being of the community.

The burden of ameliorating these problems disproportionately falls on Bangladesh. Understandably, Dhaka's policy response is focused on repatriation, which it sees as the only viable durable solution for the refugees. Making life better for the Rohingya where they are now would not only impose financial strain on Bangladesh but might be perceived as working at cross-purposes with Bangladesh's interest in Rohingya returns to Myanmar.

IV. Improving Refugees' Medium-term Prospects

Returns to Myanmar should remain the long-term goal – not only to relieve the hardship visited on Bangladesh and avoid consolidating what a UN investigation called ethnic cleansing, but also because that is the preference of the refugees themselves.¹¹ International pressure on Myanmar through the UN and by countries having influence in Naypyitaw should continue to focus on improving the situation of Rohingya remaining in Rakhine State, a prerequisite for any sustainable return. This pressure should include insistence on implementing the Kofi Annan Commission recommendations of August 2017, in particular its detailed suggestions on addressing discrimination and ensuring freedom of movement and a credible pathway to restoring Rohingyas' citizenship rights. It is only by demonstrably improving conditions in Rakhine that any refugees would consider returning home.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, refugee leaders, analysts and humanitarian workers, Cox's Bazar, April 2019. See also "In Rohingya camps, a political awakening faces a backlash", Reuters, 24 April 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, analysts with detailed knowledge of the security situation in the camps, Bangladesh, April 2019.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, refugee leaders, Cox's Bazar, April 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, refugees and refugee leaders, Cox's Bazar, April 2019 and November 2017-March 2018. See also "I still don't feel safe to go home": Voices of Rohingya refugees", Oxfam, 18 December 2017.

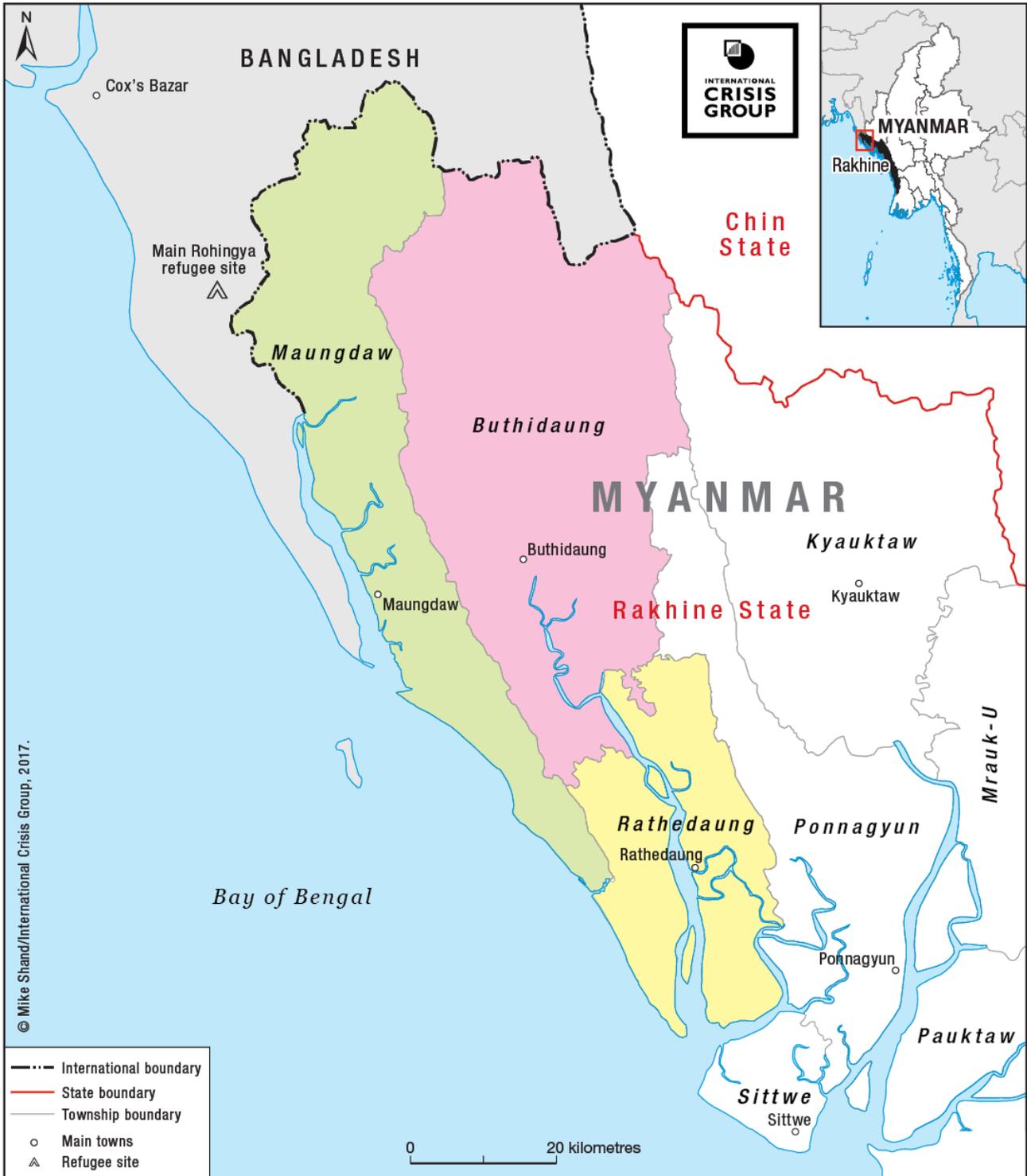
At the same time, Bangladesh should recognise – even if it does not want to state this publicly – that no major repatriation is on the horizon. In this context, policies that restrict the Rohingya refugees’ ability to prepare for an uncertain future should be eased. Allowing formal education in the camps is a first priority, and there exist local and international groups with the ability and willingness to do so.¹² Measures to improve law and order would include instituting a regular Bangladeshi police presence in the camps, investigating crimes and bringing perpetrators to justice. Failure to address these issues now will do significant long-term harm to the refugees, and potentially fuel insecurity and instability in this part of Bangladesh.

Though some of the burdens to be borne by Bangladesh are unavoidable, donors can and should, at least, lessen the financial impact on Dhaka. If the implications of the Rohingya refugee crisis for regional peace and security are not to worsen, donor countries need to be generous in their support not only to the annual humanitarian appeal but, if Dhaka’s restrictions are eased, also to longer-term assistance to the refugees.

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¹² Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian agencies, Dhaka and Cox’s Bazar, April 2019.

Appendix A: Map of Rakhine State



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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