

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Fading Humanitarianism: The Dangerous Trajectory of the Rohingya Refugee Response in Bangladesh

Daniel P. Sullivan
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PHOTO CAPTION: Rohingya refugees sit on a Bangladesh Navy ship as they are relocated to the controversial flood-prone island Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal, in Chittagong, Bangladesh on December 29, 2020. Photo by Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

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Introduction

The February 1 military coup and subsequent brutal crackdown in Myanmar have led to hundreds of deaths and the displacement of tens of thousands of people, raising concerns about further atrocities and a growing humanitarian and displacement crisis. Observers [have warned](#) of a Syria-like scenario in which prolonged conflict leads to state collapse and widespread suffering with regional implications. Donors, diplomats, and aid agencies must continue to pressure the Myanmar junta to end atrocities and must prepare for the humanitarian fall out. However, this should not distract from the imperative to provide refuge to those who have already fled the horrors of the Myanmar military. Yet this is exactly what is happening with the Rohingya in Bangladesh.

Most of the nearly 900,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh fled genocidal attacks by the Myanmar military in 2017. The February 1 coup has both distracted international attention from their conditions and greatly diminished the already low prospects of their safe and voluntary return to Myanmar. While the coup has not led to large-scale displacement along the Myanmar–Bangladesh border to date, shifting dynamics amid the deteriorating conditions in Myanmar

could quickly lead to increased outflows of Rohingya and other groups. Bangladesh has already [increased border patrols and turned back at least 100 Rohingya](#).

The government of Bangladesh has taken on an immense challenge in hosting more than 860,000 Rohingya refugees over the past three and a half years. The country deserves great credit for this effort. However, Bangladesh has restricted refugee rights from the beginning, and conditions for Rohingya in Bangladesh were deteriorating well before the coup. A mix of factors including the COVID-19 pandemic, monsoons, fires, and criminal violence have strained an already challenging humanitarian response. Pandemic restrictions have limited important services including shelter repair, psycho-social support, and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response activities. In addition, the government of Bangladesh has adopted an increasingly securitized approach to Rohingya refugees, which has exacerbated these challenges. Despite the coup, Bangladesh continues to insist on near-term repatriation for the Rohingya.

A stark example of the ways that Bangladeshi policies are making Rohingya more vulnerable is a massive fire that broke out on March 22, 2021. Barbed wire fencing constructed by the authorities around the refugee camps hindered escape and slowed efforts to contain the blaze. Several people died in the fire, thousands of shelters were damaged, and [nearly 50,000 people were displaced](#). Attempts by UN agencies to “Build Back Safer” with measures to prevent similar quick spread of fires and to improve access to services have been delayed by a slow government response and may no longer be possible.

Similarly, the movement of refugees to Bhasan Char, an isolated island in the Bay of Bengal, reflects the shift toward a policy more akin to detention than refuge. Bangladesh has yet to allow independent assessments of the island. Questions remain about how voluntary the initial movement of refugees to the Bhasan Char has been. Meanwhile, the ongoing restrictions on livelihood and education opportunities in the camps are getting worse as Bangladeshi authorities threaten to crack down on even the limited paid volunteer opportunities available to residents.

Shifts in government authority and lines of responsibility from the national level to the camp level are also creating new obstacles for humanitarian workers. Visa and project approvals have become increasingly difficult to obtain. Humanitarian officials have fewer clear interlocutors within the government, making it more difficult to address everyday issues that arise within the camps. The Bangladeshi officials that head sections of the camps, the Camps-in-Charge (CiCs) have gained greater autonomy over project approvals, making it more difficult for humanitarian officials to implement projects across camps.

The government has also taken on a more aggressive and restrictive stance at the top levels of planning for the humanitarian response. This was seen in contentious negotiations between the government and UN agencies around the latest Joint Response Plan (JRP), the document that provides a roadmap used to match donor funding with humanitarian needs. The 2021 plan was finally launched on May 18, but was greatly slimmed down from previous plans, leaving out details on several critical services such as narrowing the scope of activities to combat gender-based violence. It also failed to mention the coup and the resulting reduced prospects for repatriation. While having an agreed upon roadmap of humanitarian needs is essential and should be fully funded, donor countries must be increasingly diligent in monitoring and

consulting implementing partners and beneficiaries to ensure gaps in services do not arise due to the less detailed JRP. Donors must be prepared to press Bangladeshi officials if such gaps are identified. More immediately, donors must push back on the increased restrictions and closing of humanitarian space and ensure that their significant funding—amounting to some [USD \\$2.4 billion since 2017](#)—is being used effectively and not taken for granted.

Finally, government policies and restrictions are holding back efforts to better inform and engage the Rohingya refugees themselves. The latter remain largely left out of decisions affecting their everyday lives. Failure to empower refugees and to offer them education, livelihoods, and other opportunities to build their self-reliance will only push the community further into despair.

Bangladesh cannot be alone in shouldering responsibility for the Rohingya. International pressure must remain on Myanmar both to address the immediate coup-driven crisis and for a longer-term solution for Rohingya and other refugees. In the meantime, UN agencies and governments must offer responsibility-sharing measures to ease the burden on Bangladesh and incentivize a more protection-centered approach. Such measures should include further development, trade, and investment incentives as well as offers of third country resettlement. While Bangladesh has resisted such measures in the past, the new reality of the coup may offer an opening for reconsideration.

Research Overview

This report is based on remote interviews conducted with representatives of UN aid agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar in April and May 2021.

A Year of Emerging Challenges

Since the flight of more than 700,000 Rohingya from attacks by the Myanmar military in 2017–2018, the refugee camps in Bangladesh have remained overcrowded and far below international standards. The government of Bangladesh, assisted by UN agencies, NGOs, and international donors, has carried out a massive response that has saved lives and provided food, shelter, and other necessities. Yet the government of Bangladesh has refused to recognize Rohingya as refugees and to grant them access to education, livelihoods, and the legal system. Bangladeshi authorities have insisted on the repatriation of Rohingya to Myanmar as the only solution to the refugee crisis and prevented medium- to long-term planning around the humanitarian response. For example, restrictions on more durable building materials have left shelters more vulnerable to monsoons and fires.

This already challenged situation has been greatly strained in the past year by a range of emerging challenges in the camps including the COVID-19 pandemic, increased criminality, fires, and growing despair at the diminished prospects for returns following the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021. These dynamics are explored in the section that follows.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Secondary Effects

The COVID-19 pandemic itself has, so far, directly affected the Rohingya camps far less than initially feared. As of May 2021, there were 864 confirmed cases in the camps and 13 deaths. The real number is likely much higher, and a new spike in cases in April and May 2021 led to new restrictions across Bangladesh and a lockdown of some of the camps. There are no reliable figures for the incidence of infection in the camps, and relatively limited impacts thus far may also be due to factors such as the younger average age of the population. In any event, the general situation so far has not reached [levels anticipated](#) for such crowded conditions.

However, the [secondary effects](#) of measures taken to stop the spread of the virus have been immense. Government restrictions initially reduced the presence of humanitarian workers in the camps by an estimated 80 percent, and the Bangladeshi government limited activities to only those deemed essential. Health services, food distribution, and other services were maintained. But other important services including shelter repair, already limited education initiatives, psycho-social support, and GBV prevention and response activities were stopped. The exact toll of such restrictions is difficult to measure, but NGOs have reported skyrocketing rates of domestic abuse and other forms of GBV. Suspension of repairs to or replacement of solar lighting, particularly around latrines and wash areas, have increased risks to women.

Government restrictions have also prevented limited education opportunities as learning centers have been shut down since February 2020. While some level of restrictions is understandable, they must be carefully measured against the widespread negative consequences. As progress is made on vaccinations and other measures to reduce pandemic rates, Bangladeshi authorities should look to quickly lift restrictions. Protection services including GBV response and prevention and child-protection should be included among continued essential services in the meantime.

Rising Criminality

Criminality in the camps is also difficult to quantify, but numerous observers interviewed by Refugees International reported increased insecurity ranging from extortion and threats to kidnappings and killings. The networks behind these activities remain murky, but include a mix of gangs, drug traffickers, and those claiming links to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)—the militant group that has attacked Myanmar security posts. In October 2020, violence between rival groups led to several deaths and the displacement of some [2,000 people](#) in the camps. An increased presence by government security forces and the arrest of several actors appears to have prevented further outright violence on such a scale. But monitoring groups with which Refugees International has spoken have reported ongoing extortion and increased abductions through the first months of 2021. A humanitarian worker described the growing influence of these illicit groups as “the massive unspoken thing.” One refugee told Refugees International that the influence of criminal groups, especially at night, is so great that, “to be honest, there are two governments [in the camps].”

Fallout from the Coup in Myanmar

The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, and the violent crackdown on the massive civil disobedience movement protests that followed, have introduced a new level of uncertainty

and further reduced the prospects of safe return of Rohingya refugees. Rohingya refugees have expressed a range of views on what the coup might mean. While no comprehensive survey of Rohingya attitudes on the coup has yet been completed, accounts heard by Refugees International are consistent with what other NGOs are reporting. Most refugees appear to voice solidarity with those protesting, but despair over the threat to Rohingya still in Myanmar and the realization that return is even less likely. At the same time, they feel no love lost for the deposed civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and others who refused to recognize Rohingya as citizens of Myanmar. They largely express support for the National Unity Government (NUG) established by officials elected before the coup, but frustration with the lack of Rohingya inclusion. One refugee told Refugees International, "For now being a Rohingya Muslim minority, I can hope nothing from NUG" and cited NUG members "who still refuse to call us Rohingya and recognize us as the indigenous citizens of Myanmar."

Some Rohingya wonder if the Myanmar military, in the interest of improved relations with Bangladesh or deflecting global pressure, might allow returns. Indeed, in the first days following the coup, military officials visited Rohingya displacement camps in Rakhine State and told them they were safe and that returns would be possible soon. The reality, however, is that this is the same military that carried out crimes against humanity and genocide against the Rohingya, so returns under the current junta would be far from safe. As a refugee youth activist told Refugees International, "with Min Aung Hlaing in power, it is impossible to be safe...Repatriation will only be possible without the military."

The risk of new large-scale refugee flows of Rohingya and other ethnic groups from Myanmar also cannot be ruled out. To date, Rakhine State has been relatively quiet compared to protests and fighting in other parts of Myanmar. Only an estimated [117 Rohingya](#) are known to have attempted to cross into Bangladesh since the coup. The Arakan Army (AA), a Rakhine ethnic armed group that had been fighting the Tatmadaw up to a ceasefire weeks before the coup, appears to be waiting to see how things play out. But as Myanmar drifts further toward a failed state, the AA's calculations may change. A return to fighting could quickly lead to massive displacement as was seen in the internal displacement of tens of thousands prior to a ceasefire between Myanmar military and AA in 2020. Similarly, an alternate scenario in which the military gains further control in the country could make a repeat of large-scale attacks on the Rohingya—a favorite scapegoat—more likely, leading to more refugees crossing into Bangladesh.

The Threat of Fires

These dangerous developments over the past year have been punctuated by the newly emerged threat of massive fires. While not new to the camps, the increased size and greater frequency of fires in the camps in 2021 have been alarming. Indeed, refugees interviewed by Refugees International consistently cite the threat of fires as the single greatest challenge they currently face and the one that literally keeps them up at night. Humanitarian workers similarly cite spikes in traumatization due to the fires.

On the night of March 22, 2021, a fire broke out in the camps and quickly spread, becoming the largest fire to date. The fire destroyed thousands of shelters and displaced nearly 50,000 people. Several smaller fires have broken out since. So far in 2021, there have been [84 fires](#), more than in all of 2020. The causes of the fires remain unclear. Bangladeshi authorities carried

out an investigation of the March 22 fire and concluded that it was started by a cooking stove. But rumors of arson are running rampant in the camps, with various groups suspected ranging from the host community to government actors to the Rohingya themselves. What is clear is the ongoing heightened risks compared to previous years and the fears within the refugee community. Bangladeshi authorities should extend their investigation to the many other fires and release a public version of the findings including in the Rohingya language. Transparency and reassurance would go a long way.

Government Policies Exacerbating the Challenges

While the above-mentioned challenges have, for the most part, developed independently of direct government action, the increasingly securitized and restrictive policies of the government of Bangladesh have greatly exacerbated them. With little acknowledgement of the dangerous turn of events with the Myanmar coup, Bangladeshi officials continue to insist that hosting the Rohingya will be short-term and that they should return to Myanmar as soon as possible. Officials have rejected medium- to long-term solutions and increasingly pursued policies that have the foreseeable result of worsening conditions in the camps and discouraging refugees from staying. In the first days of the coup, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen welcomed comments from the Myanmar military about supporting repatriation. He has taken on an increasingly hardline tone with international partners, calling Bhasan Char and fencing a done deal.

At the same time Bangladesh's security agencies have gained influence, as exemplified by the creation of a cabinet-level National Committee on Coordination, Management and Law and Order, led by the Ministry of Home Affairs, and including several security services in December 2020. The new committee has a broad mandate covering coordination of Rohingya-related activities ranging from maintaining law and order in the camps to coordinating repatriation efforts. While the National Task Force (NTF) led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs still nominally leads the Rohingya response, there is clear overlap with the new body. And while the Home Affairs-led committee has been increasingly active, the NTF has not met in several months. This shifting stance has had several troubling consequences ranging from fencing in refugees or relocating them to an isolated island to restricting telecommunications and depriving Rohingya of what livelihood opportunities remain.

Fencing

The construction of barbed wire fencing around the main camp is the most visual result of this increasingly securitized approach. The government began setting up fencing in 2019, citing security risks. But rather than making refugees safer, the fencing has endangered them and likely cost lives. Numerous refugees and humanitarian workers responding to the March 22 fire [reported](#) that the fencing hindered the escape of refugees and delayed the response.

The fencing has also gone up without regard to established points of service. Numerous health centers and water collection points remain outside of the fences. Humanitarian workers have reported the elderly, pregnant women, and other vulnerable groups unable to access health services due to the fencing.

The tragedy of the March 22 fire has led to discussions on creating additional pocket gates and access roads into the fenced areas. But within days, Bangladeshi authorities had begun reinstalling fencing that had been taken down to help access the fires and have continued to move refugees living outside the fencing to areas within the fence. UN agencies and donor governments should be clear in demanding the fencing be taken down. Short of that, Bangladeshi security officials responsible for constructing the fence should work with civilian authorities to ensure sufficient points of egress, both for escape in case of fire or flash floods and to allow access to critical infrastructure that now lies outside of the fence.

Bhasan Char

Beyond fencing, the increasingly securitized Bangladeshi response is embodied in the movement of refugees to Bhasan Char, an isolated island in the Bay of Bengal. The idea of moving refugees to the island has long been planned by Bangladeshi authorities and consistently [criticized](#) by international human rights groups. In addition to falling in the historical path of cyclones, the island is a buildup of silt and prone to flooding. The Bangladesh government has invested nearly USD \$350 million into building embankments and concrete structures but has not answered key safety and logistical questions. In addition, numerous questions about how refugees would receive services, the extent of freedom of movement back to the main camps, and availability of livelihoods opportunities remain unanswered.

[UN agencies have insisted](#) that “Rohingya refugees must be able to make a free and informed decision about relocating to Bhasan Char” and have urged Bangladesh to allow “comprehensive technical protection assessments to review the safety, feasibility and sustainability of Bhasan Char as a place for refugees to live.” Human rights groups, including Refugees International, also [sent a letter](#) to Foreign Minister Momen requesting access to the island. No such assessments or access have been allowed to date.

Yet, despite these concerns, Bangladesh began moving Rohingya to the island at the end of 2020. As of May 2021, more than 18,000 refugees are now hosted on the island. The government took a group of Rohingya community leaders on a visit and eventually allowed a visit by UN and diplomatic officials. However, these guided visits did not allow for independent and comprehensive operational assessments. National NGOs have been providing services but will face challenges scaling up if relocations continue.

Serious questions also remain about the informed and voluntary nature of the relocations. False information about the island continues to circulate in the camps. In recent weeks, Refugees International has received credible reports that camp officials have falsely promised payments and Bangladeshi citizenship to the Rohingya who relocate to the island. Other refugees report “volunteering” to be relocated only after being offered amnesty from pending criminal charges. More generally, decisions to relocate seem to be based on calculations of a least-worst option compared to conditions and insecurity in the camps or return to Myanmar. Even so, several relocated Rohingya have already attempted to escape back to the main camps, [with those caught allegedly tortured](#). As Refugees International has [warned](#) previously, without appropriate assessments and adequate information for refugees about conditions on the island, such moves are “nothing short of a dangerous mass detention of the Rohingya people in violation of international human rights obligations.”

In addition, more than [300 Rohingya refugees](#) remain isolated and in detention on Bhasan Char after being rescued at sea. These refugees had left the camps in Cox's Bazar with smugglers hoping to reach Malaysia. After being stranded for weeks at sea, they were taken ashore on Bhasan Char in May 2020, reportedly as a pandemic quarantine measure. But they have remained there ever since, [reportedly](#) facing beatings and other abuses. The UN and diplomatic delegations were unable to see them during their one-off island visits. Another [30 refugees](#) rescued at sea were taken to the island at the end of April 2021. For now, these more than 300 present a glimpse of what the island could become as Bangladeshi policies continue to shift from refuge to detainment. Those held should be released and given the option to return to the main camps as soon as possible.

As the number of refugees relocated increases, UN agencies and international NGOs are under increasing pressure to balance between the humanitarian imperative to help those in need and the prospect of complicity in maintaining an effective mass detention center. To date, UN agencies are seeking to continue a difficult dialogue with Bangladeshi authorities. The UN and donors have not offered assistance or funding for Bhasan Char and some reportedly continue to take a hard line against relocation efforts without comprehensive UN assessments. Donors must use all leverage available to halt further movements until the UN is able to carry out independent and comprehensive assessments.

Cutting a Lifeline

Meanwhile, in the main camps, the government of Bangladesh continues to restrict access to education and livelihood opportunities for Rohingya refugees. A recent circular sent down by the new committee led by the Ministry of Home Affairs threatens to make things worse, demanding direct oversight of Rohingya volunteers provided with cash-for-work opportunities and seeking to further restrict what jobs Rohingya volunteers can do for NGOs and UN agencies. Bangladesh's [policy](#) of making it illegal for Rohingya to work has already made refugees almost completely dependent on humanitarian aid, and that aid is insufficient to meet basic household needs. The new directive, if implemented, would, as one humanitarian worker described, "cut off a last lifeline" for Rohingya refugees.

Further restrictions of opportunities for supplemental income risk driving refugees to negative coping mechanisms, including turning to lenders and smugglers or child marriage.

Ostensibly this is being done to discourage integration of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh that could harm the employment prospects of local Bangladeshis already negatively affected by the strains of a refugee presence that greatly outnumbers them. However, efforts to assist the host community are included in international aid efforts, and creation of livelihood opportunities need not be zero sum. Indeed, there is [ample literature and evidence](#) of the benefits of and best practices for including both host communities and refugees in livelihood opportunities.

UN agencies and donors should continue to support efforts to assist the host community. They should also encourage Bangladesh to cease further restrictions on already limited livelihood opportunities for Rohingya and explore ways to expand them.

Losing a Generation

Bangladesh continues to deny formal education opportunities for Rohingya refugees. While the government has allowed UNICEF and various NGOs to establish informal “learning centers,” such centers are not accredited by Bangladesh nor Myanmar. COVID restrictions have also kept these centers closed since February 2020. As one refugee who has lived in camps in Bangladesh since the early 1990s warned, “we’re already going to lose another generation.” Such policies also undermine efforts to prepare refugees for sustainable return to Myanmar.

A pilot program was announced in January 2020 that would allow formal education according to the Myanmar curriculum for some [10,000 children](#). This was a rare, positive development at the time. As Refugees International [stated](#) at the time the program was announced, provision of formal education was a potential game-changer that would empower Rohingya youth in their day-to-day lives and give them real hope for the future. But the launch of the pilot was delayed and then suspended with the onset of the pandemic and the consequent closure of learning centers. As efforts to fight COVID progress and restrictions are lifted, this pilot should be restarted and expanded. Bangladeshi officials should also look to provide opportunities for higher education to Rohingya refugees.

Closing Humanitarian Space

Another troubling consequence of Bangladesh’s increasingly securitized approach has been the further [closing of humanitarian space](#). This has been a perennial issue not just since the mass influx of Rohingya in August 2017, but in prior years of response to the estimated 200,000–300,000 Rohingya who arrived earlier. As Refugees International [reported](#) in May 2018, the government has “made it difficult for international humanitarians to gain the visas and approvals needed to provide aid to the Rohingya.”

Today, issues with delayed project and visa approvals continue due to onerous project approval requirements and complex and uncoordinated requests for information from various authorities. These challenges have been exacerbated by shifts in lines of authority from the national level (as seen with new directives from the Home Affairs-led committee) down to the camp level authorities (CiCs), who have become increasingly autonomous and hostile toward refugees and humanitarian officials. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), the government’s Cox’s Bazar level coordinator, had previously had greater authority to streamline project approval and implementation in the camps, but now humanitarian officials must spend more time and resources negotiating with and answering demands of individual CiCs. These shifts have further obscured an already complex response and left UN and NGO actors with greater difficulties in project approval and implementation and fewer clear interlocutors with whom to trouble shoot. The result is an even less efficient humanitarian response.

This troubling trend was on display during recent negotiations around the Joint Response Plan (JRP)—the annual roadmap developed by the UN in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh and used for estimating funding needs for various aspects of the response. While Bangladeshi officials have had a dialogue with UN agencies and NGOs over previous JRPs, the government pushback on this year’s JRP reportedly reached unprecedented levels of scrutiny and impasse and led to a much-reduced plan. Much of the government critique drew on previous reservations to planning that might hint at a longer-term presence of Rohingya in

Bangladesh. Bangladeshi officials reportedly wanted to remove any mention of refugee rights or protection, something in direct contradiction to the mandate of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). While these terms eventually remained in the plan, previously included operational details on protection, gender-based violence, and development were left out.

This is more than just semantics. The JRP, as a document agreed to at the highest levels of government, provides humanitarian workers with a tool to push back on resistance at the field level. Less detail on approved services in the JRP means greater room for interpretation and obstruction from CiCs who tend to be more resistant to pro-refugee policies. It is also an important signal to donors about the greatest needs. And it is a troubling indication of where the Bangladesh government stands. As one humanitarian worker put it, what happened with the JRP “is a bellwether of what is to come.”

Donor countries should fully fund the proposed USD \$943 million plan but must monitor implementation closely and be prepared to push back where gaps or obstacles are identified by implementing partners and beneficiaries.

Failure to Engage and Include

Refugees International has [written](#) in the past about the failure of the Bangladeshi government and aid agencies to engage and inform Rohingya refugees. Discussions with refugees and officials in the field indicate that while there have been some efforts at improvement, the Rohingya remain largely disempowered.

On the positive side, UN agencies have launched additional efforts to include Rohingya in decisions about assistance, notably via UN Women programming and through IOM’s community outreach efforts.

But, as one refugee told Refugees International, “the majority of the people are not much aware about what exactly is going on or what is planned” in the camps. He gave the example of an official taking the names of a family and marking their shelter without informing them that they were about to be moved to make room for a new road. Such examples are common in the camps. A recent [report](#) by ACAPS and the UN Migration Agency (IOM), based on 194 focus group discussions with some 1,200 refugees, found that participants in 72 percent of female focus group discussions and 67 percent of male focus group discussions “reported that they did not feel engaged in consultations and decision-making processes.”

UN agencies should do a better job of engaging and informing communities, starting with broader consultations on projects and follow up. But, as humanitarian workers told Refugees International, the main problem is not the humanitarian response or understanding Rohingya needs, it is government policy. [Government policies have prevented more representative governance structures in the camps](#), favoring the *majhi* system—literally translating to “helmsman” or “boat captain”—based on leaders hand-picked by Bangladeshi authorities. Authorities have also muted civil society organizations – one of the bright spots in raising Rohingya voices – through increased surveillance and scrutiny of NGOs working to empower them.

A recent stark example of government policy holding back engagement efforts has been seen in efforts to rebuild after the March 22 fire. IOM quickly developed a “Build Back Safer” plan that would have included use of more fire-resistant materials, fire breaks between shelters, and better location of services. But government officials delayed responding and prevented clear messaging to refugees who began to rebuild their own shelters. With the monsoon season approaching, the window of opportunity for better planned reconstruction has passed.

Finally, engaging with and informing the Rohingya community will be vital to successful efforts to prevent future spikes in the spread of COVID, especially as new variants emerge. A failure to do so, to date, has contributed to a lack of clarity over the true impact of the pandemic in the camps. While the official case numbers are low, the actual number is almost certainly higher. The initial COVID response was [plagued by mistreatment and missteps](#), which led many refugees to refrain from reporting potential infections or to come forward for treatment. In the first months of the pandemic, health facilities [reported](#) a two-thirds decrease in respiratory infection-related consultations (those with symptoms similar to COVID) and a 50 percent decrease in overall consultations. In a bit of good news, the government of Bangladesh has so far included refugees in its national vaccination planning, with a campaign for refugees expected to begin in coming weeks. But any vaccination efforts will be greatly held back if trust is not built through further engagement and dedicated efforts to counter false information.

Responsibility Sharing

The ultimate solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Myanmar. International pressure on the military junta must be maintained and increased. In the meantime, Bangladesh must refrain from policies that are unnecessarily restricting the humanitarian response and making the lives of refugees worse. Bangladesh should also see resilience within the Rohingya community as in its interest. Providing education and development of livelihood skills contributes to more sustainable future returns.

But the responsibility does not fall to Bangladesh alone. International donors must seek ways to share the responsibility beyond humanitarian assistance, including through development aid and third-country resettlement. As has been [suggested](#) by the Center for Global Development, governments, international financial institutions, and private companies can [offer a range](#) of trade incentives, infrastructure investment, and development of new Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to provide employment for affected host communities in Cox’s Bazar and perhaps Rohingya refugees as well. The compacts in Jordan, Lebanon, and Ethiopia provide possible examples. Such ideas have been met with resistance by the government of Bangladesh, but the new coup reality may provide a window for revisiting them, especially if part of a greater coordinated push among donor countries.

Similarly, the new coup reality may be an opportunity to re-engage Bangladesh on third-country resettlement as a form of responsibility-sharing. Third-country resettlement is not likely to be the solution for the bulk of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, but it could offer hope to many and send a powerful signal of international solidarity. Indeed, the government has hinted that it may be willing to change its stance against such efforts. Foreign Minister Momen recently raised

the idea of the United States taking in a good number of Rohingya in a meeting with the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh.

Countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and European countries should engage the government of Bangladesh in a dialogue on resettlement and seek to offer a significant number of places to incentivize a shift in policy. The United States should lead the way by offering a significant number of spots for resettlement and consider some kind of priority (P-2) status for Rohingya in Bangladesh in order to streamline processing. P-2 status includes specific groups identified by the State Department in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security/U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, UNHCR, or other experts as in need of resettlement and considered "[of special humanitarian concern to the United States.](#)" The P-2 program is a faster alternative to individual referrals for resettlement through UNHCR and has been used in the past to help expedite resettlement of Bhutanese in Nepal, Congolese in Rwanda and Tanzania, and Myanmar refugees in Thailand who fled earlier persecution.

Bangladesh's neighbors in the region should also be encouraged to offer alternative pathways, such as temporary work visas or access for students to higher education. At the least, or as a first step, the United States and other countries should urge Bangladesh to provide resettlement for medical emergencies and family reunification.

Conclusion

The coup and deteriorating conditions in Myanmar will rightfully remain the focus of international attention on the region. But this does not mean that the dangerous trajectory of Bangladeshi policies toward Rohingya refugees can be ignored. Indeed, the tragedy in Myanmar and threat of further displacement and human suffering underscore the importance of Myanmar's neighbors showing solidarity and compassion to those who have fled the Myanmar military's abuses. Bangladesh has been at the forefront of providing refuge. With the support and encouragement of international donors and humanitarian actors, it can and must maintain that welcome and turn back from the dangerous trajectory toward which it is currently heading.

Recommendations

To the government of Bangladesh:

- Remove barbed wire fencing from around the camps that makes it more difficult for refugees to access services and hinders escape from and response to an increasing number of fires in the camps.
- Expand investigations into the causes of fires in the camps and publicly release the results, including in the Rohingya language.
- Refrain from moving refugees to Bhasan Char until independent UN assessments can confirm the safety and feasibility of hosting refugees on the island and until adequate steps are taken to inform refugees and ensure any moves are voluntary. Refugees

currently on the island should be allowed to return to the main camps if they choose. Allow access for independent human rights organizations and media to Bhasan Char.

- Update and clarify the national strategy on the Rohingya, including clear lines of reporting and responsibility and streamlining of NGO project approvals and visa processes to allow a more efficient and informed response. Ensure consultation and inclusion of UN, NGO, and refugee representatives in the development of new policies affecting refugees and the humanitarian response. Revise governance structures within the camps, including clarification of the mandates of Camps-in-Charge (CiCs) and addressing corruption and overreach.
- Include protection services such as GBV response and prevention, child protection, and psycho-social support among the essential services that are continued under COVID-related restrictions. Lift COVID-related restrictions on humanitarian presence and services in the camps as soon as safely possible, and ensure that any restrictions are carefully weighed against the negative impact of the loss of key services.
- Expand education and livelihood opportunities. Restart and expand the pilot education program agreed to in 2020 to include accreditation and access to higher learning. Expand volunteer cash-for-work programs that provide a vital lifeline for refugees. Allow formal livelihoods programming and opportunities for refugees to work.
- Refrain from repatriating Rohingya refugees to Myanmar until conditions are safe and a legitimate government has taken meaningful and verifiable steps to address ongoing human rights abuses, restrictions on movement and humanitarian access, and denial of citizenship and fundamental rights to the Rohingya.
- Allow third party resettlement of Rohingya refugees starting with particularly vulnerable cases and family reunifications.
- Ensure equitable access to COVID vaccines for refugees, and improve community outreach efforts to build trust and counter misinformation.

To UN agencies, member states, donors, and NGOs:

- Maintain and expand pressure on the Myanmar military to end attacks on civilians and return to a path to democracy that respects the rights of ethnic minority groups including the Rohingya. Such pressure should include expanded targeted sanctions, a global arms embargo, and concerted diplomatic efforts. The United States should appoint a high-level Presidential Envoy on Myanmar to coordinate U.S. multilateral efforts.
- Prepare a regional humanitarian response to likely increased displacement and humanitarian needs because of deteriorating conditions in Myanmar.
- Demand that the government of Bangladesh reverse restrictive and dangerous policies including fencing, movement of refugees to Bhasan Char, and push backs of new refugees.
- Work with the government of Bangladesh to clarify and streamline the humanitarian response, including removing bureaucratic barriers such as onerous project approval requirements and complex and uncoordinated requests for information.
- Work with the government of Bangladesh to allow education and livelihood opportunities for refugees.
- Offer responsibility-sharing measures including development, trade, and investment incentives and third-country resettlement. The United States should lead in offering resettlement and consider some kind of P-2 designations for Rohingya in Bangladesh

and work with Bangladesh and likeminded countries to offer a significant number of spots for resettlement.

- Fully fund the efforts laid out in the 2021 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, while increasing diligence and being prepared to press Bangladesh officials on any service gaps arising from the less detailed latest version of the plan.