

The Rohingya Refugee Situation and Its Effects on Local Host Communities

A Civil Society Report on the Field Visit in Ukhiya, Bangladesh

Introduction

The Rakhine refugee situation is considered to be one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. More than 12 lakh Rohingyas fled state-sponsored persecution and violence in Myanmar last year, and hundreds more are crossing borders to escape horrific conditions in their home country every day. It is clear that addressing this gargantuan issue should be the concern of the international community, particularly the Asian region.

In this context, we, a group of concerned civil society organizations working on land rights and human rights in Asia,¹ organized a two-day field visit to Ukhiya and Cox's Bazar on November 26 and 27, 2018. We aimed to acquire first-hand information on the situation on the ground and the effects of the crisis, from the perspective of local host communities.

We conducted interviews with human rights officers from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Regional Office for Southeast Asia; Ruapantar, an NGO working on outreach and protection programs with host communities in Ukhiya Upazila including female Muslim community in Ukhiya-Foliapara; and male Buddhist community in Shailerdeba. We also visited the Modhupchara refugee camp and had informal discussions with the Rohingyas living in the said camp.

Given the above limitations, we can only echo what we have heard from the affected communities, and share what we have observed during the two days.

Findings from the field visit

The people and the government of Bangladesh have opened their hearts and borders to these refugees. In addition, the communities we talked to confirmed that the government had also exerted adequate efforts to defuse potential tensions that the influx of refugees might have caused. More than 12 lakh Rohingyas have now found shelter and safety in Cox's Bazar, where aid from all over the world sustain their everyday needs.

More than a year after the camps were set up, and after unsuccessful repatriation efforts, the situation on the ground becomes more pressing and increasingly complex.

The host communities we discussed with are well-informed about the situation in Myanmar. They are empathetic to the plight of the Rohingyas. For these communities, religion and race are secondary issues – to be concerned about the welfare of others is simply human. They do not want Rohingyas to return to Myanmar without guarantees of their citizenship and safety.

¹ The field visit team is composed of Ms. Rowshan Jahan Moni and Mr. A. K. M. Bulbul Ahmed from Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD), Bangladesh; Ms. Ujjaini Halim from Institute for Motivating Self-Employment (IMSE), India; Mr. Nathaniel Don Marquez and Ms. Denise Hyacinth Joy Musni from Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC), Philippines/Asia.

While Rohingya refugees continue to live in crowded camps, the communities adjacent to the areas have also been facing difficult situations. The surge of aid is understandably concentrated on the refugees. However, due to complications brought on by this crisis, host communities are now demanding for aid for them as well. They cannot help but feel marginalized in their own communities.

Most of the people in host communities are living with modest incomes from informal agricultural and non-agricultural work. Yet because of the sudden surge of people into Ukhiya, prices of basic commodities such as fish have soared. Their purchasing power has gone down.

Moreover, wages have plummeted. From earning 500 BDT a day, an agricultural laborer is now taking home just 300 BDT. As per the members of the female Muslim community, they now have to compete with Rohingyas in the labor market. Though it is illegal to employ the Rohingyas, communities claim that the practice has been rampant, without the regulation of the local government. Refugees are being illegally hired and paid with half the local wage.

School-age minors from the host communities have been reported to be working at the camps to provide additional income for their families.

Access to other resources has also been affected. Members of the community are accustomed to foraging in nearby forests for firewood and crops. Unfortunately, the greeneries have now been ravaged because of the sheer number of people extracting resources to meet basic cooking needs. According to news reports, some 4,000 acres of forestland in and around the refugee camps have been destroyed for the construction of shelter and for firewood.

Water is becoming a scarcer resource. Deep wells have been set up inside the camps for the refugees. As an effect however, groundwater levels have gone down.

The crisis has negatively affected families, women, and children both within and outside of the camps. As reported by some women from a host community, married also unmarried Bangladeshi men have been going into the camps to be with young Rohingya women, with some of the women being minors.

To avoid the possibility of having Rohingya newborns be registered as Bangladeshi citizens, the local government has also temporarily stopped birth registration altogether. This has caused concern among the locals, as their children are being deprived of their right to citizenship.

Community members also express that the Rohingyas are prioritized in health centers.

Among host communities, there are heightened security concerns brought on by the crisis. According to community members, several Rohingyas have been involved in looting cows and other personal belongings. They have also expressed fear over Rohingyas establishing connections with crooks and criminals outside of the camps.

All these highlight the multiple facets of deprivation among Rohingyas and host communities brought on by this crisis, but we've only just begun scratching the surface. Illicit activities are on the rise and show no signs of being quelled any time soon. Perceived competition over resources may spark conflicts between host communities and refugees.

Calls to action

The oppression of one marginalized group causes disenfranchisement of other groups, and this crisis should not be shouldered by one country alone. With this, we call on the international community to be in solidarity with Bangladesh in finding solutions for the Rakhine refugee crisis in both the short-term and in the long run. In particular:

- We applaud all contributions to relief efforts for the refugees, and urge the continuation of sustained and concerted efforts towards providing aid. For agencies involved in service-delivery, closer coordination is needed to optimize resources and avoid the exclusion of stakeholders. More efforts should be exerted on consulting the affected local communities in developing support programs.
- We call on government agencies and aid-providing organizations to attend to the needs of host communities as well. We recognize the nutrition assistance provided by the World Food Programme through Resource Integration Centre (RIC, a Bangladeshi CSO) to some 22 women in Ukhiya-Foliapara. However, more livelihood support is needed for these communities to cope with the economic effects of the crisis.
- We call on media and CSOs to keep producing reports on the effects of this crisis, for continued understanding on the issue and for it to remain in the public consciousness. As the truth is unveiled, increasing pressure from the international community to the government of Myanmar is expected.
- The Rohingya people deserve to live in peace in their homeland, without fear of persecution and oppression. Recognizing this, we demand that the government of Myanmar facilitate voluntary, safe, and dignified repatriation, through responding to the demands of Rohingyas. Amidst news sources revealing massive Chinese and Indian investments on the Rakhine State, we call on the government of Myanmar to give utmost priority to protecting the rights of its people.
- We call on states, especially those in Asia, the ASEAN, and SAARC, to exert more pressure on the government of Myanmar to recognize and respect the rights of the Rohingyas.

From our end, we have recognized the need for CSOs from Asia to be more involved in this situation. We have already discussed these issues during regional forums and international gatherings. We intend to shed more light on the refugee crisis, and its enduring effects on the people and the environment. We will carry the results of and recommendations from this short mission back to our own countries, and will engage with National Human Rights Institutions and Commissions (NHRI/Cs), the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), and the Southeast Asia National Human Rights Institution Forum (SEANF), and South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), to raise the discourse at national and regional levels. □