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# RI BULLETIN

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## A POWERFUL VOICE FOR LIFESAVING ACTION

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### **Bangladesh: Burmese Rohingya Refugees Virtual Hostages**

Protection and humanitarian problems continue to plague the Burmese Rohingya refugees living in two camps in southern Bangladesh. A wave of more than a quarter of a million Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority, fled to Bangladesh in the early 1990s as a result of severe oppression and human rights abuses by the Burmese military government. Since then about 230,000 of the refugees have been repatriated to Burma, many against their will, and there remain approximately 20,000 Rohingya in the refugee camps of Nayapara and Kutupalong in Bangladesh.

The situation for the Rohingya in the camps has become more complicated due to UNHCR's decision in 2003 to phase out its support for the 20,000 refugees remaining in the camps and implement its proposed self-sufficiency plan to integrate the Rohingya refugee population with the local Bangladeshi community. The self-sufficiency plan was rejected by Bangladeshi authorities in September 2004. UNHCR, however, is continuing to seek an exit strategy and plans to rework the self-sufficiency program in 2005 into one involving temporary stay and freedom of movement and present it again to the Bangladeshi government.

Refugees report unbearable conditions in the camps, primarily due to the serious abuse and intimidation at the hands of Bangladeshi local authorities and *mahjees*, or camp volunteers, picked from the Rohingya population by the Bangladeshi manager of the camp. Instead of being representatives of the refugees, the *mahjees* are seen as an arm of the government, playing a major role in forcing refugees to repatriate. Since 2003, when large numbers of refugees complained of coercion to return to Burma, protection against involuntary repatriation has improved significantly, primarily due to UNHCR playing a more active role. UNHCR has stopped several repatriation movements when allegations have surfaced about them being forced. As a result whereas more than 3,000 refugees were sent back to Burma in 2003, there were only about 200 repatriations in 2004. In early 2005, UNHCR came up with a housing grant of 15,000 Bangladeshi takas (about \$235) as an incentive for refugees to repatriate; it remains to be seen how effective this cash grant will be in speeding up repatriations.

Although the current slow pace of repatriations is reportedly voluntary, the refugees complain of ongoing pressure from local authorities and *mahjees* to sign "voluntary repatriation declarations." When they refuse to go back, they encounter ill-treatment such as beatings, arbitrary arrests and confiscation of ration cards. Many of the refugees feel that if they return to Burma, they will face the same kind of religious, cultural and political persecution from which they escaped to Bangladesh in the early 90s. It is not clear how many of the Rohingya repatriated to Burma have since returned to Bangladesh, although agencies working with the refugees in southern Bangladesh claim having seen many of the Rohingya previously repatriated back in Bangladesh and living outside the camps.

The refugees also face extortion threats by powerful local elements outside the Rohingya camps who collaborate with camp authorities. The refugees told RI that they feel voiceless, often harassed and abused, not allowed to form refugee committees or even to hold meetings in the camp. If they are outspoken, they are at risk of camp officials lodging a false case against them and sending them to jail. If

they mention their concerns to foreigners visiting the camps, they are punished for daring to express their grievances once the foreigners depart.

More restrictions have been placed on the refugees since a violent incident on November 18, 2004, when tensions between refugees and camp authorities, which began with refugees staging a hunger strike in June, reached a boiling point. The refugees wanted to organize a meeting to discuss their inhumane treatment at the hands of the camp authorities, but were prevented from meeting. A brawl ensued and police and local people became involved. By the end of the clashes, three refugees, including a minor, were killed by police and 42 refugees detained. UNHCR requested the Bangladeshi Government to investigate the incident but so far no investigation report has been produced.

The Bangladeshi Government prohibits the refugees from establishing their own management committees to oversee service delivery in key sectors like food management, water, sanitation, health and education. The refugees receive rations from WFP, which are distributed by teams of refugee volunteers, under the supervision of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society or BDRCS. The refugees interviewed by RI said that they are victims of local corruption and the BDRCS workers cheat them out of their complete rations, using a fake scale when WFP officials are not around. Consequently some of the refugees end up receiving 5 kilograms of rice as opposed to the nominal standard of 6.5 kilos per refugee.

Under UNHCR's phase-out plan, the agency stopped supplying refugees with packets containing spices and basic condiments as part of their rations so many of the refugees have resorted to selling part of their rations to outsiders in order to buy spices and other commodities. During the process of selling rations, the refugees are vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of the locals who have a monopoly on buying rations at low prices. The rates of malnutrition in the camps are disturbing. The most recent nutrition survey showed 12.8% of the children were acutely malnourished, including 0.5% severely malnourished; chronic malnutrition was present in 65.4% of the refugee children.

Water and sanitation remain problematic, especially in Nayapara camp where Bangladeshi authorities are in charge of these services, and refugees complain of inadequate water, particularly in the dry season. They also report bad sanitation facilities, which lack maintenance, and garbage pits located just outside their shelters. As a consequence of the poor hygiene and unsanitary conditions, the overall disease environment is alarming, with high levels of acute respiratory infections, skin diseases, worms and diarrhea.

Due to UNHCR's mismanagement of the transition for service provision in the camps, two international NGOs providing health and nutrition programs to children under ten and pregnant and nursing women, MSF Holland in Nayapara camp and Concern in Kutupalong camp, had to discontinue these services in 2003. The programs were taken over by the Bangladeshi Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Since the handover, there has been a significant decline in the standard of health services being provided to the refugees. The refugees stress that medicines are in short supply and not easily available, and doctors refer few patients to hospitals outside the camps.

There are significant gaps in the education services in the camps and as a result of opposition from the Bangladeshi government, refugee children only have access to very poor education services that do not meet minimum basic standards. Literacy rates in the camps are only 12% and instruction per day lasts just two hours. Even informal education was not permitted in the camps prior to 1997, and at present there is no educational or vocational training for children over the age of 12 years in the camps. Due to the lack of higher educational opportunities, children are not motivated to stay in school.

The teachers in the camp schools are refugee volunteers. Many of them have spent their lives in the camps, where they received a minimal level of education, very basic teacher training, and few incentives. The teachers also are under threat from camp officials and *mahjees*, who accuse them of political activism, and they are suspected of writing letters on behalf of refugees. NGO workers involved in the

education sector note that teacher training and acquiring more Burmese textbooks for the children has not been a priority for UNHCR in recent months as it is focused on its phase-out.

The refugees see their conditions deteriorating further with the withdrawal earlier this year of Concern, the last international NGO involved in providing assistance to the camps in education, community services, sanitation in Kutupalong camp and logistics and procurement. Concern was also seen to be playing a role in the protection of refugees through its community services program. With its departure, there is a gap in implementation of projects, and although UNHCR has recruited a few former Concern staff to keep programs running until another agency agrees to step in, shortfalls persist.

Refugees International, therefore, recommends that:

**UNHCR:**

- Continue its role in ensuring that repatriation is voluntary, and take more effective steps in preventing abuse of refugees within the camps.
- Bring improvements in humanitarian situation by building more partnerships with international NGOs to provide services in sectors like health and education.
- Halt the implementation of its phase-out strategy as Bangladeshi officials have emphasized that they will not accept an assimilation plan for the refugees.

**Government of Bangladesh:**

- Ensure that all repatriation is voluntary and prevent local authorities from pressuring refugees to go back against their will.
- Cease all harassment, intimidation and arbitrary prosecution of refugees.
- Permit refugees to participate in camp activities by establishing committees for food distribution, water provision, and other social services at the block levels.
- Allow refugees to democratically elect their own representatives and permit freedom of movement of the refugees.
- Improve existing educational opportunities, extend them to secondary level and allow vocational training.
- Conduct an independent investigation in the killings of the 3 refugees on November 18, 2004, make the findings public and bring the perpetrators to justice.
- Cooperate with UNHCR to provide durable solutions for the Rohingya refugees.

**International Donors:**

- Consider funding operations in the Rohingya refugee camps to fill in significant gaps in services to the refugees.
- Do their utmost to find durable solutions for the Rohingya refugees, including resettlement.

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*Kavita Shukla and Larry Thompson assessed the situation for Rohingya in Bangladesh in February 2005.*