

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Burma / Myanmar > Arakan / Rakine (Burma) > Rohingyas (Burma/Myanmar) > **Bangladesh / Myanmar: Voluntary Rohingya repatriation in short term looks (...)**

Bangladesh / Myanmar: Voluntary Rohingya repatriation in short term looks more challenging: UN

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Int'l community must share responsibility, it says

The United Nations has urged the international community to step up and share responsibility, noting that recent developments in Myanmar make the prospects of voluntary repatriation of the Rohingyas to Myanmar in the short term more challenging.

"The responsibility for the current Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh rests with Myanmar, and that's where the solution lies," said the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, at the conclusion of its two senior officials four-day visit to Bangladesh.

UNHCR Assistant High Commissioners for Protection and for Operations — Gillian Triggs and Raouf Mazou — wrapped up their visit on Wednesday and called for international support and solidarity with Rohingya refugees and Bangladesh.

UNHCR called on the international community, including through the recently launched 2021 Joint Response Plan, to continue to support the government of Bangladesh who have taken on a huge responsibility in hosting almost 1 million Rohingya refugees in the largest refugee camp in the world. "This must not become a forgotten crisis."

"While Bangladesh has shown humanity and solidarity, in line with the guiding principles of the Global Compact on Refugees, the international community must step up and give practical effect to the obligation to share responsibility, and to protect refugees and support the host Bangladeshi Government," said Triggs.

Throughout the visit, the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioners reiterated their sincere appreciation to the government and the people of Bangladesh for their humanitarian spirit and generous hospitality towards Rohingya refugees as they sought protection from violence and persecution in Myanmar over decades.

This includes, notably, the recent influx of more than 740,000 Rohingya refugees since August 2017.

They also reiterated the urgent need to continue working towards comprehensive solutions, including the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

The protection, wellbeing, and concerns of refugees, as well as renewed efforts towards solutions should be at the forefront of the response, said the UNHCR.

The visit included tours of the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar where the vast majority of Rohingya refugees reside, and the island of Bhasan Char, as well as meetings with senior government officials.

The Assistant High Commissioners visited the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and met the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), responsible for the overall coordination of the Rohingya refugee response in Cox's Bazar as well as the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Cox's Bazar.

Despite the Covid-19 challenges, they noted remarkable strides have been made in preparing for and responding to the pandemic, both within and outside of the camps, for refugees and host communities alike.

The Assistant High Commissioners visited a Covid-19 treatment facility in the local community of Ukhiya, which was built in just eight weeks.

This facility alone has responded to the needs of around 1,000 patients in the past year, almost 70% of whom came from the Bangladeshi host community.

"The inclusive Health Sector response in Cox's Bazar has saved lives. The government has set a positive example by including the Rohingya refugees in the national Covid-19 response and the related national vaccination plans. Responding to the needs of both communities on an equal basis is essential to ensuring that everyone is kept safe," said Mazou.

Additional challenges have been presented by Covid-19 and related restrictions in the camps.

The Assistant High Commissioners observed a reduced humanitarian presence in the camps and associated protection risks.

UNHCR advocates for essential protection services for the most vulnerable, including women and children who are particularly exposed to gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation, early marriage and child labour.

In its work, UNHCR listens to the voices of refugees. During the visit to the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, the Assistant High Commissioners had the opportunity to discuss with refugees and to better understand their situation and needs.

Many stressed the need for the resumption of education and skills training.

The government facilitated a visit of the Assistant High Commissioners to Bhasan Char.

While on the island, they clearly recognised the significant financial investments by the Bangladeshi government in facilities and infrastructure, including housing.

However, UNHCR said, it was clear that the 18,000 Rohingya refugees currently on the island have protection and assistance needs.

That is, access to meaningful livelihood opportunities, skills development, education, health and access to cash to facilitate their daily lives.

UNHCR recognised the potential that Bhasan Char could provide as an alternative temporary location for some Rohingya refugees while in Bangladesh.

"Bhasan Char has some potential, though the human and protection elements of refugees living

there must be fully considered. The refugees who decide to relocate to Bhasan Char must do so on a voluntary basis. They should have freedom of movement on the island and must be granted the possibility to return to Cox's Bazar and maintain family connections with those in the camps," said Triggs.

While on Bhasan Char, UNHCR had the opportunity to talk to a large group of refugees, predominantly young men.

They raised their concerns about the lack of access to livelihoods and self-reliance opportunities, skills development, as well as access to education.

While ultimately, the desired solution by the majority of the Rohingya refugees is to return home voluntarily, safely, sustainably and in dignity, when conditions in Myanmar allow, the crisis is now in its fourth year and refugees cannot remain fully dependent on aid, the UNHCR said.

"Livelihoods and skills training opportunities will provide refugees with a sense of purpose and autonomy while they're in Bangladesh, while preparing them for reintegration when conditions allow them to return home," stressed Mazou.

While continuing to work together with the support of the international community towards voluntary repatriation, the Assistant High Commissioners discussed the possibility of introducing alternative solutions for Rohingya refugees, including resettlement to third countries for the most vulnerable with specific protection needs, as well as complementary pathways overseas, which could include employment and educational opportunities.

UNB, Dhaka

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