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Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh: ‘The world cannot afford to look away’

Friday 14 February 2025, by [NOOR Sadeque Nur](#) (Date first published: 14 February 2025).

Noor Sadeque is a student activist who was among the Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar in 2017. He has been a resident of Cox’s Bazar refugee camp for eight years. He describes what life in the camps is like and why the world needs to stand in solidarity with the Rohingya, advocating for justice, security, and a dignified future.

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The Rohingya refugee crisis remains one of the most urgent humanitarian challenges of our time. Since the mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar in 2017, Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh has become the epicenter of the world’s largest refugee settlement, housing more than a million forcibly displaced people.

The sprawling camps, densely packed into a fragile landscape, are a harrowing testament to the ongoing suffering of the Rohingya people. Life in the camps is defined by extreme overcrowding, chronic insecurity and insufficient access to basic necessities. The camps’ residents are not aware of how to report problems or access aid and support, there is no vehicle access in or out of the camps, and refugees there face an uncertain future.



Inside Cox’s Bazar refugee camp. Photo supplied

Persecution, statelessness

For decades, the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group from Myanmar’s Rakhine region, have endured systematic persecution, forced displacement, and statelessness while struggling to gain recognition and protection from the international community. Stripped of citizenship under Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law, they have been deprived of fundamental rights and subjected to apartheid-like

restrictions on movement, education and employment.

Systematic discrimination by successive Myanmar governments led to arbitrary arrests, forced labour, land seizures, and severe military crackdowns. The situation escalated into genocide in August 2017 when [Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, launched a ruthless "clearance operation"](#) following an attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

[What followed was one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century](#). Tens of thousands of Rohingya were massacred, entire villages were burned to the ground, and women and girls were subjected to mass sexual violence as a weapon of war. Infants were slaughtered, some thrown into fires, while the elderly and disabled were burned alive in their homes.

Myanmar's security forces carried out extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and the destruction of property on an unprecedented scale, forcing entire communities to flee with no food, water, or medical care. Families were ripped apart in the chaos, parents watched their children die in front of them, children were left orphaned and wandering in terror. [The United Nations later declared these crimes bore "genocidal intent. Satellite images confirmed the obliteration of Rohingya villages,](#) effectively erasing generations of their existence from Myanmar's landscape.

A treacherous escape

The more than one-million-strong Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh in 2017 was a perilous journey to join the hundreds of thousands who had escaped previous waves of persecution.

People endured weeks of exhausting travel, with families trekking barefoot through jungles, mountains and rice paddies, carrying children and the elderly whilst enduring starvation.

Many attempted to cross the Naf River in overcrowded boats, only to capsize, resulting in tragic mass drownings, or to be shot at by Myanmar security forces. Many lost their entire families while crossing the river.

With no access to food or water, refugees suffered from severe dehydration, hunger, and disease. Some collapsed and died from exhaustion, their bodies left behind as others had no choice but to keep moving. Pregnant women gave birth on the roadside, alone and without medical care, their newborns arriving into a world of suffering.

Survivors arrived in Cox's Bazar physically, emotionally and mentally broken. The sprawling refugee camps, now home to nearly a million Rohingya refugees, became a place of refuge and despair.

Overcrowded bamboo shelters offered little protection from extreme weather and a lack of clean water and sanitation led to deadly outbreaks of cholera, diphtheria and other diseases. Hunger and malnutrition ravaged families as humanitarian aid dwindled, leaving many to beg or scavenge for food. Fires, both accidental and deliberate, ripped through the camp, turning what little its residents had into ashes.

Women and children, already traumatised by past horrors, faced new dangers: human trafficking, sexual violence and exploitation.

Life in the refugee camps

The conditions in the camps remain harsh and inhumane, forcing people into a relentless struggle for survival. The camps, particularly Kutupalong and Balukhali, are among the largest and most densely populated refugee settlements in the world.

Shelters are cramped, fragile, and barely livable. Families of six to ten people are often squeezed into 10 square metre spaces; constructed from bamboo, tarpaulin and plastic sheets. These makeshift homes offer little protection from the elements.

During monsoons, heavy rains flood the camps, turning pathways into mud and washing away shelters. Contaminated water sources lead to outbreaks of waterborne diseases, while damaged infrastructure hampers the delivery of food and medical supplies.

In summer, the heat inside the plastic-covered huts becomes unbearable.

Fires are a constant threat, rapidly spreading through the tightly packed shelters, leaving many homeless overnight. In March 2021, a massive fire destroyed more than 10,000 shelters, leaving 50,000 homeless. Another fire burned down schools, mosques, and homes in January, 2022. A fire killed several refugees and displaced thousands more in March, 2023, and last December a fire burnt down 546 shelters, killing two refugees.

Each fire exacerbates the already dire living conditions, leaving refugees with even fewer resources and greater uncertainty.

Healthcare is woefully inadequate, with limited access to proper medical facilities, leaving many refugees suffering from malnutrition, tuberculosis, waterborne diseases and untreated injuries. Mental health issues are widespread, with trauma, anxiety and depression affecting countless refugees who have witnessed unimaginable horrors.

Education remains a distant dream for most children, as formal schooling is banned. The few learning centers available offer only basic education, leaving the younger generation without opportunities for growth. Without proper education, an entire generation is at risk of being left without a future.

Security concerns add another layer of suffering. Criminal gangs, human traffickers and armed groups operate freely, spreading fear among residents. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, facing gender-based violence, abduction and exploitation. The reduction of food rations due to funding shortages has worsened the crisis, forcing many into desperation and risky choices to survive.

Facing torture, violence in Myanmar

Since last year, the livelihoods of Rohingya remaining in Myanmar have further deteriorated. There have been [reports of abuses perpetrated by various armed groups, including the Arakan Army \(AA\)](#). The AA, an ethnic Rakhine insurgent group, has been implicated in harrowing acts against the Rohingya, including torture, killings, and sexual violence.

Many families, under extreme duress, have been forced to flee their homes once again, attempting perilous crossings into Bangladesh. Tragically, numerous individuals have perished during these journeys, with entire families drowning in treacherous river crossings.

In addition to abuses by the AA, the [Myanmar military has forcibly recruited more than a thousand Rohingya men and boys since February last year](#), deploying them to frontline combat roles where many have been killed or injured. This forced conscription has been accompanied by false promises of citizenship and financial compensation, further exploiting the vulnerable Rohingya population.

These recent developments underscore the ongoing vulnerability of the Rohingya within Myanmar, as they continue to face multifaceted threats from both state and non-state actors.

Urgent need for international action

The Rohingya crisis demands immediate and sustained global intervention. The following actions are critical to addressing the plight of the refugees:

Justice and accountability: Perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity must be held accountable by international legal mechanisms.

Increased humanitarian aid: Additional funding is urgently needed to provide food, healthcare, education, and shelter for the refugees.

Enhanced protection and security: Stronger measures are required to curb violence, protect vulnerable groups, and dismantle criminal networks operating in the camps.

Safe and dignified repatriation: A just and voluntary repatriation process, overseen by international organizations, must be established to ensure the safe return of refugees to Myanmar with full citizenship rights and guarantees of safety.

The international community must stand in solidarity with the Rohingya, advocating for justice, security, and a dignified future. The world cannot afford to look away; the time to act is now.

Noor Sadeque Nur
noorsadeque97 gmail.com

P.S.

- Green Left, February 14, 2025:
<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/rohingya-refugee-bangladesh-world-cannot-afford-look-away>
- Noor Sadeque is a student activist who was among the Rohingya refugees who fled Myanmar in 2017. He has been a resident of Cox's Bazar for eight years. His supporters in Australia have established a [fundraising campaign in solidarity](#) with Noor to help him rent a safe house after he was targeted by armed gangs for his activism, and to help pay for his mother's medical treatment.