

The Rohingya crisis

Making the transition from emergency to longer-term development

Caitlin Wake and Brenda Yu



Key messages

- Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh to escape violence and persecution in Myanmar. Housed in overcrowded camps, they lack adequate assistance and protection; the Bangladesh government does not recognise their status as refugees, and they enjoy few rights or freedoms.
- Although Bangladesh and Myanmar have agreed a repatriation deal, any discussion of return is premature given ongoing violence in Myanmar and the widespread reluctance among refugees to go home.
- Political and diplomatic progress to address the crisis in Myanmar has been minimal. China and Russia have blocked action at the UN, and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been unable to develop a coherent position.
- The constrained policy environment in Bangladesh, the absence of any realistic prospect of safe and voluntary return and the lack of political progress to resolve the crisis in Myanmar all suggest that displacement will be protracted. Past experience shows that, once a refugee is displaced for over six months, they are highly likely to be in exile for years. There is no reason to believe that this refugee crisis will be any different.
- Now is the time for operational organisations, donors and the government of Bangladesh to start preparing for the impact of long-term displacement. A three-pronged approach is needed, involving continued response to urgent humanitarian needs, the mobilisation of resources to support a longer-term developmental response and a significant shift in policy to enhance refugees' rights and freedoms.

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Photo: Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh, escaping violence in Myanmar.

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Since August 2017, more than 650,000 Rohingya people have fled violence and persecution in Rakhine State in Myanmar, bringing the total number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to more than 900,000. Operational organisations in Cox's Bazar are overwhelmed, hampered by funding shortfalls, poor coordination and planning and a challenging operating environment. In Myanmar, the government has blocked the humanitarian response and placed restrictions on journalists, human rights observers, local and international NGOs and the UN. Political and diplomatic progress to address the root causes of the crisis has been minimal. China and Russia oppose UN resolutions intended to end the campaign against the Rohingya, and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is divided on how to respond. Six months since the latest exodus began, there is little hope the conflict will be resolved in the near future.

The Rohingya refugee crisis can no longer be thought of or responded to as a short-term humanitarian emergency. While short-term life-saving assistance for refugees is crucial, now is the time to plan for longer-term displacement, and find ways to support both the Rohingya in Bangladesh and affected host communities in the months and years to come.

How do we know this will be a protracted crisis?

Global trends

Evidence from past crises illustrates that, once someone is displaced for six months, they are likely to be in exile for years. Eight out of ten refugee crises last for ten years or more, and one in five last for more than 30 years.¹ Once a refugee family has been displaced for six months, they are highly likely to end up in exile for at least three years, and often much longer. There is no reason to believe that the Rohingya crisis will buck this trend.

History repeating

The 2017 displacement of Rohingya refugees is the latest phase in a protracted cycle of persecution, exodus, tenuous asylum space and return. Since the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled persecution in Myanmar and sought refuge in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and Thailand. Most recipient countries have been uneasy and restrictive hosts, reluctant to accept

asylum-seekers, grant refugee status, enable aid actors to assist refugees or allow programmes and policies that would facilitate formal integration.² In Bangladesh, most Rohingya are effectively stateless, without formal refugee status, adequate humanitarian assistance or protection. At present, they also have little realistic prospect of a formal durable solution (de jure integration, resettlement or repatriation).

While the public narratives of the Myanmar and Bangladeshi governments suggest they are actively working towards solutions, the reality is more complicated, as exemplified by the issue of repatriation. In January 2018, the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh reached an agreement to repatriate 156,000 Rohingya over the following two years. However, discussions regarding repatriation – which under international law must be voluntary, and should take place under conditions of safety and dignity – are premature. While Myanmar says that it is willing to repatriate refugees as per the agreement, the government has stipulated that refugees who want to return must produce identity documents (which few have). Given the Myanmar government's wholly inadequate response to the crisis, and pressing concerns around justice, rights, access and proposed conditions upon return, voluntary repatriation is implausible. While some Rohingya refugees have said they would be willing to return if their safety, security, rights and citizenship were guaranteed, many refuse repatriation under current circumstances.

Repatriation cannot be treated as a quick-fix solution to the current crisis: it should be viewed as an eventual, durable solution to a protracted crisis.

Political impasse makes political resolution unlikely
The government of Myanmar continues to undermine efforts to resolve the human rights and humanitarian crisis stemming from the treatment of Rohingya in Rakhine State, which the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar recently stated bears the 'hallmarks of genocide'.³ External intervention has been stymied

1 See Nick Crawford et al., *Protracted Displacement: Uncertain Paths to Self-Reliance in Exile* (London: ODI, 2015) (<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9851.pdf>).

2 Caitlin Wake, 'Turning a Blind Eye': The Policy Response to Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia (London: ODI, 2016) (<https://www.odi.org/publications/10648-rohingya-refugees-unhcr-livelihood>).

3 Global Centre for Responsibility to Protect, 'Mounting Evidence of Genocide in Myanmar (Burma)', 13 March 2018 (<https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/mounting-evidence-genocide-myanmar-burma>).

by the fragmented and uncoordinated international response to the situation in Myanmar. Both China and Russia opposed a UN Resolution calling on the government of Myanmar to grant full citizenship rights to Rohingya, ensure the safe return of refugees and allow aid workers access in Rakhine.⁴ At the regional level, ASEAN states are bound by a policy of non-interference in members' domestic affairs. While Indonesia and Malaysia have offered statements in support of the Rohingya, ASEAN as a whole has taken little concrete action to generate or push forward solutions.⁵ Aung San Suu Kyi recently addressed Australia and ASEAN in a closed-door meeting, where she reportedly asked for their help,⁶ but it is too early to judge what if any action will stem from the meeting. *The international community must help resolve the political impasse at global and regional levels.*

Shifting the response: as developmental as possible, as humanitarian as necessary

Longer-term planning

On the ground, needs are immense. Many Rohingya arrived with few possessions and are confined to overcrowded camps. Structures and services, such as safe drinking water, lighting and medical care, are inadequate; refugees are living in small, flimsy shelters, and hastily constructed water and sanitation facilities will not survive the impending monsoon season. The likelihood of severe weather poses a credible risk of a 'disaster within a disaster', with potentially catastrophic results.⁷ The majority of operational organisations in Bangladesh have focused on providing life-saving assistance to address these needs and risks, including food, water, medical supplies, preparations

for the monsoon and other short-term services, such as primary healthcare and basic education. While this assistance is essential, now is the time to begin transitioning from care and maintenance based on the provision of food and short-term services to planning for the impact of longer-term displacement.

A first step is to improve coordination on the ground between the UN, international NGOs, local actors and the government, including through the appointment of a Humanitarian Coordinator in Bangladesh, separate to the existing UN Resident Coordinator. In strengthening coordination, the aid sector should consider what possibilities exist to transition from existing programmes (such as food distribution and education in emergencies) to more longer-term programming (for example livelihoods interventions). Such programming can draw on existing evidence and policies on how to support refugee livelihoods and self-reliance in both camp and non-camp settings.⁸ Excellent small-scale examples include a sewing programme that helps Rohingya refugee women produce goods for distribution to other women in the camps.⁹ Beyond considerations of resources and feasibility, a critical component of this planning will be to integrate the voices of the Rohingya people. This does not mean just soliciting their views at the needs assessment stage, but instead actively involving and listening to them at all stages of programming. *By strengthening the coordination of the response effort and better integrating the voices and perspectives of the Rohingya people on the programmatic level, the humanitarian sector would be in a much stronger position to respond to longer-term needs.*

Longer-term funding

Like operational organisations, donors have been operating on the basis of a short-term funding model. The newly released Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya crisis requested \$951 million from March to December 2018, with the focus very much remaining

4 Agence-France Presse, 'China and Russia Oppose UN Resolution on Rohingya', 24 December 2017 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/24/china-russia-oppose-un-resolution-myanmar-rohingya-muslims>).

5 There is also room for improvement in their treatment of Rohingya refugees on their own soil. See Caitlin Wake and Tania Cheung, *Livelihood Strategies of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: 'We Want to Live in Dignity'* (London: ODI, 2016) (<https://www.odi.org/publications/10449-livelihood-strategies-rohingya-refugees-malaysia>).

6 Ben Doherty, 'Aung San Suu Kyi Asks Australia and Asean for Help with Rohingya Crisis', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2018 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/18/aung-san-suu-kyi-asks-australia-and-asean-for-help-with-rohingya-crisis>).

7 Somini Sengupta and Henry Fountain, 'The Biggest Refugee Camp Braces for Rain: "This Could Be a Disaster"', *New York Times*, 14 March 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/climate/bangladesh-rohingya-refugee-camp.html>).

8 Karen Jacobson and Susan Fratzke, *Building Livelihood Opportunities for Refugee Populations: Lessons from Past Practice* (Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2016) (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/building-livelihood-opportunities-refugee-populations-lessons-past-practice>); UNHCR, 'Livelihoods and Self-reliance: Camps' (<https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/112067/livelihoods-and-self-reliance-camps>).

9 Caroline Gluck, 'Rohingya Refugee Women Stitch New Lives in Bangladesh', UNHCR, 7 March 2018 (<http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/3/5a952b604/rohingya-refugee-women-stitch-new-lives-bangladesh.html>).

on short-term funding.¹⁰ While the initial appeal was better funded than most (at 70%),¹¹ funding for displacement crises often decreases rapidly after the first few years and camp budgets are often underfunded.¹² We also know from past refugee responses that care and maintenance is expensive and frequently ‘fails to meet the basic needs of long-term refugees’ and ‘neglects their human development needs, preventing refugees from contributing to their own wellbeing and to economic and social development in their host countries’.¹³

Donors should commit to longer-term, flexible funding that would better enable operational organisations to provide sustainable and appropriate support.

Calls for a refugee compact¹⁴ merit consideration given the potential to generate the funding and vision required to mount an effective longer-term response. Lessons from the Jordan compact indicate that ‘by building on existing political capital between donor governments, international organisations and host governments, as well as economic and political incentives such as trade deals, a restrictive policy environment can be opened up and funds can be mobilised in a short space of time’.¹⁵ That said, the longstanding position of the government of Bangladesh – characterised by a reluctance to explore long-term responses to refugees, particularly those that involve the provision of refugee status or social and economic integration – suggests that the conditions for a compact may not yet be in place. Caution is also needed regarding the speed and efficacy of such arrangements in generating positive outcomes for refugees.¹⁶

¹⁰ *JRP for Rohingya Refugee Crisis, March–December 2018* (<https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/JRP%20for%20Rohingya%20Humanitarian%20Crisis%202018.PDF>).

¹¹ See <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/628/summary>.

¹² Cosgrave, Crawford and Mosel, ‘10 Things to Know about Refugees and Displacement’.

¹³ Jacobson and Fratzke, *Building Livelihood Opportunities for Refugee Populations*.

¹⁴ Cindy Huang, *Why Bangladesh Needs a Refugee Compact and Three Big Ideas to Make It Happen*, Center for Global Development, 7 February 2018 (<https://www.cgdev.org/publication/why-bangladesh-needs-refugee-compact-and-three-big-ideas-make-it-happen>).

¹⁵ Veronique Barbelet, Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Dina Mansouri Ille, *The Jordan Compact: Lessons Learnt and Implications for Future Refugee Compacts*, ODI Policy Briefing, February 2018 (<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12058.pdf>).

¹⁶ Ibid.

An enabling environment

Bangladesh should be recognised for opening its borders to the Rohingya, providing them with safety and leading a large-scale humanitarian response. At the same time, however, refugees enjoy few rights or freedoms; as well as denying them refugee status, the government has restricted all facets of social or economic integration, contained refugees in a small geographic area and restricted education services, refugees’ freedom of movement and opportunities to work and support themselves. For their part, operational organisations and donors face constraints in their operations and in long-term planning, with problems around visas, work permits and access in the camps. Action is needed to overcome the policy constraints that inhibit long-term responses, but Bangladesh has shown little appetite for this in the past and is unlikely to be more amenable in an election year, when the government must manage the Rohingya refugee crisis as it pertains to the interests of citizens, host communities and other political parties.

While this is a challenging political agenda to pursue at the best of times, it cannot be ducked. The current refugee response is untenable, and past crises have shown us the importance and value of implementing policies to support the livelihoods of refugees at the onset of a refugee movement.¹⁷ The scale of this crisis requires an enabling policy environment, and Bangladesh should be supported in putting one in place: donors and the international community can provide resources, as well as experience from countries such as Uganda and Cameroon, where response frameworks are more permissive, and in relation to the Syria crisis, including Jordan’s adoption of more open policies and livelihoods approaches as part of the compact. *The government of Bangladesh must recognise the Rohingya as refugees and improve its response to their needs. Neighbouring countries should support it in doing so.*

Conclusion

Past experiences of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and other countries, as well as the ongoing political impasse at the global and regional level, indicate that this crisis is likely to persist for years. While

¹⁷ Veronique Barbelet and Caitlin Wake, *Livelihoods in Displacement: From Refugee Perspectives to Aid Agency Response* (London: ODI, 2017) (<https://www.odi.org/publications/10901-livelihoods-displacement-refugee-perspectives-aid-agency-response>).

live-saving assistance is essential, the nature of the crisis is incongruent with the current response, and operational organisations, donors and the government of Bangladesh must all move away from working in a short-term humanitarian emergency mode and recognise that this is a protracted crisis that will require resources and action with longer time horizons. A three-pronged approach is needed, involving continued response to urgent humanitarian needs, the mobilisation of resources to support a longer-term developmental response and a significant shift in policy to enhance refugees' rights and freedoms, including recognition of their status.

Addressing the challenges around operational space, coordination, freedom of movement and economic rights are critical steps to enable government and non-governmental stakeholders to implement a more effective long-term response. While acknowledging the sensitivities, particularly in the current political climate, if donors are willing to invest in local development and infrastructure they could be in a better position to work with the government of Bangladesh to pursue an agenda in which both refugees and host communities benefit from their investment (in, for example, livelihoods or infrastructure).

In parallel, more diplomatic pressure must be brought to bear towards a political solution to the persecution and discrimination that is at the heart of the crisis. China and ASEAN can be particularly influential given their links and ties to Myanmar.¹⁸ China has significant political and economic interests and influence in both Bangladesh and Myanmar, as seen in the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor, one of the main economic channels forming part of China's Belt and Road initiative. While it is unlikely that China will publicly shift its position on Myanmar, the international community should continue to encourage Beijing to exert its influence to oppose human rights

violations and seek dialogue (through its Special Envoy to Myanmar, for example). The solution to this crisis ultimately rests with Myanmar: regional and international actors have a critical role to play in challenging and supporting Myanmar in reaching an eventual resolution.

Recommendations

For the UN and governments

- Appoint a Humanitarian Coordinator in Bangladesh to improve the coordination of the response.
- Encourage China's Special Envoy to Myanmar to exert their influence to oppose human rights violations.
- Press Australia and ASEAN member-states to engage with Aung San Suu Kyi and reach an eventual resolution of the crisis with the Myanmar government.

For the government of Bangladesh

- Recognise the Rohingya as refugees and improve the response to their needs.
- Recognise repatriation as an eventual, durable solution to what is a protracted crisis.
- Remove the bureaucratic impediments preventing operational organisations and donors from engaging in longer-term responses (visas, work permits, access to camps).

For operational organisations in Bangladesh

- Push for stronger coordination of response efforts with partners in Cox's Bazar.
- Ensure that the Rohingya people's voices and perspectives are included on a programmatic level.
- Transition existing programming (such as food distribution) to longer-term programming.

For donors funding the response in Bangladesh

- Recognise this as a protracted crisis which will require resources and action with longer time horizons.
- Commit to longer-term, flexible, multi-year funding in Cox's Bazar.
- Invest in local development and infrastructure.

¹⁸ *Violence in Rakhine State and the UK's Response: Government Response to the Committee's First Report*, 6 March 2018 (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/868/86802.htm>).