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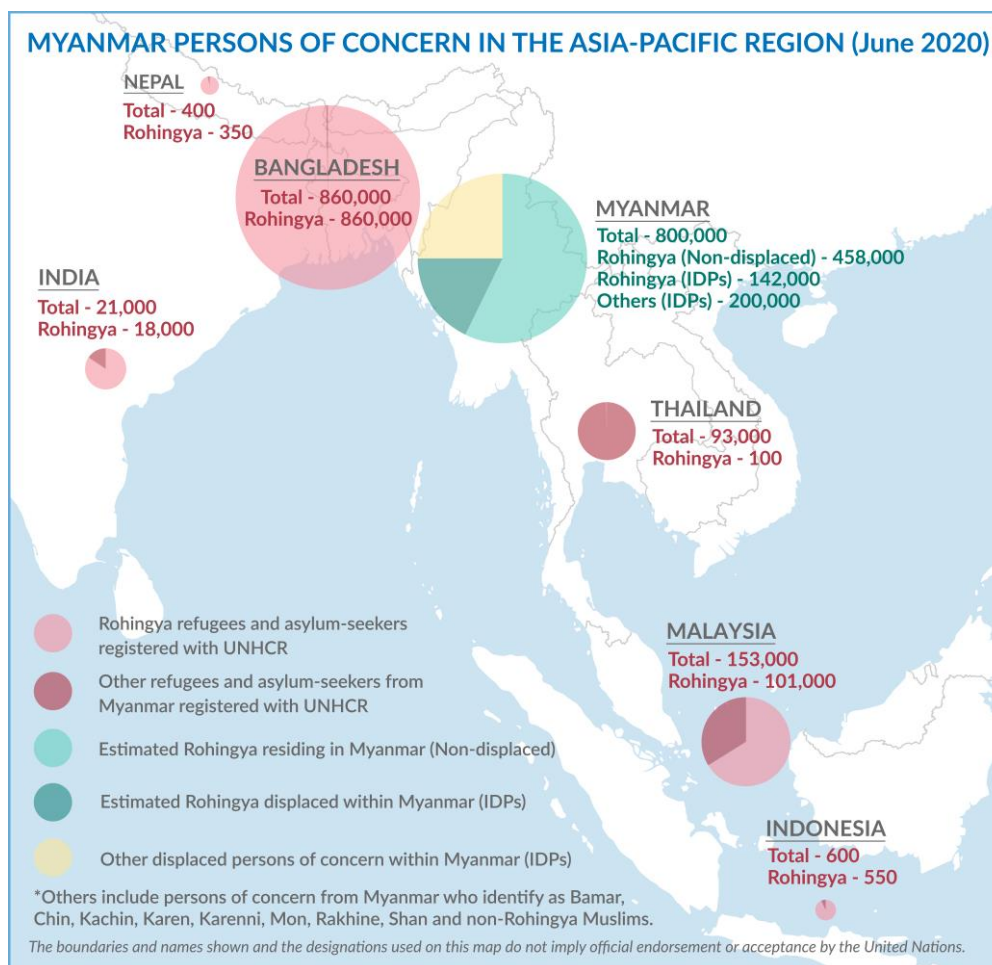
## THE DISPLACED AND STATELESS OF MYANMAR IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

An overview of the current situation for Rohingya and other persons of concern from Myanmar and UNHCR's response across the region.

January 2021

## Situation Overview

By mid-year 2020, there were an estimated 1.9 million persons of concern to UNHCR from Myanmar in the Asia-Pacific region. The vast majority—about 1.6 million—were Rohingya, a minority group from Myanmar who have been forcibly displaced across the region. Myanmar’s discriminatory citizenship laws have stripped nearly all Rohingya of their citizenship, making them the largest identified stateless community in the world. UNHCR has registered almost one million Rohingya refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly in Bangladesh (860,000), Malaysia (101,000) and India (18,000), as well as smaller numbers in Indonesia, Nepal, Thailand, and other countries. An estimated 600,000 Rohingya continue to remain in Rakhine State, Myanmar, of whom 142,000 are internally displaced.



Despite an expressed desire to return to Myanmar, Rohingya refugees say they are not yet confident that the environment in Rakhine State has improved to the point that they could return in safety and dignity, and none have so far returned under bilateral arrangements on voluntary repatriation between Bangladesh and Myanmar (detailed below). To advance solutions for the Rohingya, avoid an even more protracted displacement, and ensure that they can meanwhile live in dignity wherever they are, UNHCR and its partners are focusing their efforts on four areas:

- **Addressing the root causes:** The solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Myanmar, through Myanmar’s full implementation of the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, which

would pave the way for peace for and between all communities in Rakhine State and enable the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees.

- **Maintaining humanitarian assistance:** Significant material support will be needed to maintain lifesaving assistance and uphold basic standards of living for Rohingya refugees in host countries and those internally displaced and stateless in Myanmar.
- **Expanding opportunities:** Rohingya children and youth need to have hope for a life with dignity. Education, skills development, and livelihoods are vital to preparing them for full, productive roles in society and empowering them to envision a future of personal growth and self-reliance, which in turn will make them less vulnerable to exploitation, including smuggling and trafficking.
- **Investing in host communities:** Development investments are needed in host communities to help them mitigate the socioeconomic pressures of hosting refugees, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As solutions are found for Rohingya refugees, host communities need support to make them more resilient, not less, than when the refugees first arrived.

## Myanmar

Rohingya refugees have fled discrimination and violence in Myanmar for decades. Hundreds of thousands sought safety in Bangladesh in 1978, 1992 and again in 2016 and 2017, when Myanmar military operations in Rakhine State resulted in over 700,000 Rohingya fleeing to Cox's Bazar District. Tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees have also fled to Malaysia, India, and other countries in other waves of displacement. For some 600,000 Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State, discriminatory restrictions on their citizenship and movement make it difficult for them to access basic services. Among them, 142,000 Rohingya are internally displaced, the vast majority confined to closed IDP camps. Like Rohingya refugees, most Rohingya IDPs are also not yet able to return to their places of origin or other places of their choosing.<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, UNHCR continued to pursue solutions for all refugees from Myanmar, emphasizing the need to provide a clear pathway to citizenship for the Rohingya and to end discriminatory restrictions on freedom of movement, as recommended by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. In May 2020, Government of Myanmar, UNDP, and UNHCR extended a tripartite memorandum of understanding (MoU) to improve conditions in Rakhine State. The MoU, first signed in 2018, established a framework for cooperation aimed at creating conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of refugees to their places of origin or choosing. To date, UNHCR and UNDP have conducted needs assessments in 130 locations and are implementing 95 quick-impact projects that aim to enhance livelihoods, education and social cohesion in local communities in the northern townships of Rakhine State home to the majority of Rohingya refugees. The projects address the needs of all communities and have so far benefited approximately 19,285 individuals.

Despite the Government's commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, progress has not been sufficient to enable the voluntary return of Rohingya refugees or IDPs. The most basic needs of Rohingya in Rakhine State — freedom of movement, access to basic services and a pathway to citizenship — remained unfulfilled. Access and movement restrictions have impeded UNHCR and its partners' ability to scale up community projects. Some of this work, as well as

<sup>1</sup> While significant barriers remain for Rohingya IDPs to return to their places of origin or choice, in 2020 the Government of Myanmar initiated two pilot projects for Rohingya IDPs displaced since 2017 to return to their places of origin and approached UNHCR and UNDP to provide support. These pilots supported 67 displaced families who voluntarily chose to return with multi-sectoral assistance including shelter and WASH support.

projects to improve repatriation prospects in Rakhine State planned by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have been delayed as a result of COVID-19 and ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, which had further displaced over 106,000 people within Rakhine and Chin States by the end of 2020.

Other groups displaced internally within Myanmar include some 104,000 IDPs in Kachin State and the northern part of Shan State, where conflict between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups has been ongoing since 2011, as well as 10,000 IDPs in parts of southeast Myanmar still subject to sporadic clashes between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups. UNHCR leads the protection, shelter/NFI and CCCM clusters in the inter-agency response for all IDPs, relying on national partners to deliver assistance to IDPs in areas where access is restricted.

Southeast Myanmar is also the place of origin of 93,000 mainly Karen and Karenni refugees hosted in nine temporary shelters in Thailand, many since the 1990s. Third-country resettlement has enabled over 114,000 such refugees to depart Thailand since 2005, but resettlement has significantly declined in recent years as resettlement countries ended group resettlement programmes for these refugees and conditions in southeast Myanmar became conducive to voluntary repatriation. Since 2016, UNHCR has facilitated the voluntary repatriation of 1,039 refugees from Thailand and supported their reintegration in Myanmar. UNHCR continues to deliver protection services to the Myanmar refugees who remain in Thailand and is engaged in Myanmar and Thailand on pursuing a multi-solutions strategy to find a dignified, sustainable and comprehensive end to this situation of protracted encampment.

## Bangladesh

The Government and people of Bangladesh continue to shoulder the greatest responsibility for hosting Rohingya refugees, with over 860,000 refugees hosted in the Cox's Bazar settlements. The impact on host communities has been substantial, with a range of environmental and socioeconomic consequences. Cox's Bazar, which has a population of 2.3 million, is one of Bangladesh's poorest districts. The influx of refugees has exacerbated pressure on national systems, such as health services, and it has affected food security and nutrition, including by driving increases in the price of basic food and non-food items.

The protection response for refugees has been strengthened through community-based mechanisms, the bedrock of the response, including a network of Rohingya volunteer community outreach members - community groups of refugee men, women, youth (boys and girls), religious leaders, teachers - who identify and refer people at heightened risk to specialized services and disseminate lifesaving information. Other positive developments include improved preparedness and response for the monsoon and cyclone seasons, environmental rehabilitation and support for the social safety net of host communities, which also fosters social cohesion.

In 2019, UNHCR and the Government jointly completed the registration of all Rohingya refugees, providing them with identity documents – many for the first time in their lives – and establishing a basis for their right to return to Myanmar (continuous registration/ verification is still ongoing). Rohingya lack a formal legal status in Bangladesh, however, prohibiting their productive engagement in society through formal work and increasing their reliance on humanitarian assistance.

The inclusion of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh's national COVID-19 response and a concerted prevention effort by the Government of Bangladesh and the humanitarian community have thus far spared

refugee settlements in Cox's Bazar from the worst of the pandemic, but the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed Rohingya refugees further into poverty and debt, exacerbating an already dire situation.

Although COVID-19 restrictions have temporarily closed refugee learning centres, education actors have moved ahead with procuring learning materials and recruiting teachers in preparation for the rollout of a pilot project for 10,000 refugee students in grades 6-9 to be taught based on the national curriculum of Myanmar. The pilot was approved by the Government of Bangladesh in 2020 and, once implemented, will be the first time the Myanmar curriculum is made available to Rohingya refugees. It is a crucial first step towards access to quality education for Rohingya children in Bangladesh.

Many protection challenges remain, however, including security concerns related to violent incidents. In 2020, the Government proceeded with the construction of perimeter fencing around refugee settlements and the relocation of refugees to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal where the Government of Bangladesh plans to eventually relocate as many as 100,000 Rohingya refugees. Thousands of refugees have already been transferred to Bhasan Char. Since 2018, the UN has continued to request access to carry out technical and protection assessments, which are needed to better understand the safety and sustainability of the location for refugees, as well as the feasibility of establishing a humanitarian operation there. These assessments have not yet been permitted by the Government.

The refugee influx in Bangladesh also presented many environmental challenges. Once heavily forested, Cox's Bazar has suffered over the years from deforestation as communities have cut wood for construction and cooking, with studies showing the forested area has declined by approximately 40% since the 1990s. However, with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing violence in Myanmar, the rate of deforestation greatly increased. To counter this, since August 2018 UNHCR has been distributing an alternative fuel—liquefied petroleum gas (LPG)—and improved cooking stoves, reducing the need for refugees to gather firewood from the nearby forest.



*Before and after photos from the reforestation project in the camps (2018 on the left, 2019 on the right). Photo Credit: UNHCR/ Steven O' Brien*

Since reaching full coverage of the camps with LPG in February 2019, UNHCR has assisted 107,000 households with cooking sets and LPG refills, and the results have been remarkable. According to a UNHCR-commissioned study, in just under a year and a half since LPG's distribution, there has been an 80% reduction of demand for firewood by Rohingya households in the camps. Reforestation proceeded in tandem with these efforts to reduce the use of firewood. UNHCR and other partners in the Energy and

Environment Technical Working Group, in collaboration with the Bangladesh Forestry Department, have undertaken the reforestation of more than 500 hectares of land. Planting has also contributed to disaster risk reduction through the stabilization of soil and a reduced incidence of landslides. The images above illustrate the remarkable success of the reforestation project in the camps.

LPG's benefits go beyond easing pressure on forests. It has been found to have a positive impact on food habits and nutrition due to ease of cooking and it reduces pollution in the kitchen. Having LPG at home also means women and girls need not travel long distances to collect firewood, thus reducing the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, while children, who used to spend hours collecting firewood, now have more time for classes. UNHCR has also prioritized support to vulnerable families in the host community through cash assistance, providing seeds, and teaching farming techniques, and contributing to infrastructure repair (including projects addressing water shortages which will benefit refugees as well as the host community).

The Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar have agreed on a bilateral framework for the voluntary repatriation of Rohingya refugees who fled Rakhine State since 2016, but as conditions in Rakhine State are not yet conducive to return in safety and dignity, no refugees have returned under this framework yet. Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have also not had access to other durable solutions, as the Government of Bangladesh has not allowed Rohingya refugees to depart for third-country resettlement since 2010 and as a matter of policy does not locally integrate refugees.

## Malaysia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, and Thailand

By mid-year 2020, a total of 174,000 Myanmar refugees and asylum-seekers were registered in Malaysia and India, over two-thirds of whom were Rohingya; hundreds of Rohingya are also registered in Indonesia, Nepal and Thailand. As in Bangladesh, the 119,000 Rohingya hosted in these countries do not have legal status. They often continue living on the margins of society and engage in informal work. In Malaysia and India, Rohingya and other persons of concern from Myanmar have been subject to prolonged detention in poor conditions and without access to UNHCR. Their access to public healthcare is limited, with NGOs facilitating access to medical facilities, with support from the international community. In Malaysia, Myanmar refugee communities have pooled their own resources to establish learning centres and, with support from civil society, have improved the standard of education to the point that some are now registered and licensed by the Ministry of Education. A majority of Myanmar refugee children, however, still do not attend any type of formal schooling, and the few that do are generally unable to certify or advance their studies. Some in India, Indonesia and Thailand have access to public education, but most cannot afford the costs of travel to schools, in addition to facing language and other barriers. Rohingya refugees in particular have been the target of xenophobic hate campaigns in Malaysia and India. UNHCR advocacy and activities in these countries focus on refugee inclusion, through policy measures that would expand education and livelihood opportunities, as well as social cohesion efforts that raise awareness among host communities of the situation faced by refugees.

Solutions for Rohingya hosted in these countries are as elusive as for those in Bangladesh, though a limited number of the most vulnerable have been resettled to third countries in recent years. For the Rohingya who comprise the small populations in Nepal and Thailand, their isolation coupled with a lack of foreseeable solutions has led to mental health concerns and increased their vulnerability. Other particularly vulnerable groups of Rohingya in these countries include girls sent by their families on risky journeys (see below) to marry Rohingya men. To mitigate such risks, UNHCR works closely with refugee community-based

structures and promotes the active participation of women in community leadership and management. UNHCR is also working to ensure the inclusion of Rohingya and all refugees in national systems, including child protection services, education and health services, the importance of which has been underlined by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Maritime Movements

Despite difficult conditions for Rohingya refugees across the region, over 2,400 Rohingya attempted to reach other countries by sea in 2020, including 700 allowed to disembark by Bangladesh and nearly 400 who were rescued and welcomed by the people of Aceh, Indonesia, and brought to shore in an orderly and safe manner that mitigated public health risks. While the number of Rohingya who travelled by boat in 2020 is fewer than during the height of such movements from 2012 to 2015, it is a significant increase compared to recent years. The urgent need for a predictable framework in the region to rescue and disembark Rohingya has been underscored by the loss of some 200 refugees who died or disappeared at sea in 2020. Such a framework is needed so that Rohingya refugees are less compelled to resort to risky onward movement and so that countries do not fear that disembarking refugees will leave them to shoulder the responsibility alone and indefinitely. Advance preparation and coordination among local authorities and humanitarian agencies in Indonesia enabled the immediate screening of the refugees for COVID-19 as well as any specific needs, and timely contributions from the international community have ensured that these needs are met. Additional regional humanitarian and development initiatives are needed to share the costs of undertaking rescue, disembarkation, and public health measures for Rohingya refugees in distress at sea and identifying and assisting those with specific needs.

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### Links

- [UNHCR Myanmar Situation page](#)
- [Rohingya Support Conference website](#)
- [UNHCR Bangladesh operational portal](#)
- [UNHCR Thailand-Myanmar cross-border operational portal](#)