



# 'I STILL DON'T FEEL SAFE TO GO HOME'

Voices of Rohingya refugees

*'If the international community wants to move us, we can go. But returning us by force – it would be better to throw us in the creek, and bury us.'*

Nur Alum, a 65-year-old grandfather in Balukhali camp, Bangladesh. He previously fled Myanmar in the 1970s and 1990s.

*'The government promised Bangladesh so many times that Rohingya can live peacefully. We cannot believe them, after everything that has happened. I cannot go back.'*

Younis Kadir, a 60-year-old Rohingya man who fled his home in Myanmar on 26 August 2017.

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# 'I DON'T KNOW WHEN THERE WILL BE PEACE AND WE CAN GO BACK.'



*'We couldn't bring anything except the clothes we were wearing.'*

Sumaya fled to Thegkhali camp, Bangladesh with her husband and children.

The words of Fatima Sultan, a 20-year-old mother who fled Myanmar in September 2017, echo those of many of the refugees who have spoken to Oxfam. Since 25 August, more than 626,000 Rohingya have reached Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> In the week to 2 December alone, 1,622 more arrived.<sup>2</sup> Thousands more are stranded at the border.<sup>3</sup> Almost certainly, this exceptional flow of refugees will keep on coming.

They come to one of the poorest countries in the world – in which almost half the population live on less than US\$1.25 a day.<sup>4</sup> By the end of November 2017, the number of Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazaar district had passed 836,000,<sup>5</sup> including around 200,000 who came in previous flights over 25 years.

Rohingya women and men have told Oxfam devastating stories of killings, rape and sexual violence. This report is an opportunity for some of them to share their stories, hopes, and their experiences of living in overcrowded camps with overflowing latrines and contaminated water. As heavy rains and the cyclone season in 2018 threaten to bring new disaster and increase the risk of cholera. And as – irrespective of the recent bilateral agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh – most Rohingya are terrified of returning to Myanmar while the discrimination that drove them away is unchanged.

## Refugees' messages

Three main messages came through Oxfam's interviews with Rohingya refugees:

- Their fear of return to Myanmar in the near future, and a plea not to be forcibly returned;
- Their strong feeling, however, that they belong in Myanmar, hope of eventual return to their homes, and a call to Myanmar's government to offer the safety, citizenship, and equal rights that would make that possible;
- Their relief to have reached Bangladesh, and a call to its government and others to tackle the issues, including sexual violence and human trafficking, that still threaten their safety.

**It would be profoundly wrong to implement the bilateral agreement without listening to those views.**

Behind the refugees' views is what the UN has called a 'coordinated and systematic pattern of destruction by the Myanmar security forces...and the forced displacement of large sections of the Rohingya population'.<sup>6</sup> Beyond those crimes against humanity, and this crisis, are two of the most disaster-affected countries in the world, whose struggle against poverty is starkly demonstrated by Bangladesh and Myanmar ranking at 139 and 145 in the UN Human Development Index.<sup>7</sup>

## FOREWORD



Oxfam was formed in 1942 in a humanitarian spirit, to campaign to get food through to thousands of people starving in Nazi-occupied Greece. We spoke truth to power. We put human lives first.

In the seventy-five years since then, we have listened to women, men and children – to their hopes, their fears, their aspirations. We work to help them to claim rights for themselves. We know that when people have the power to do so, they can escape poverty forever.

This report puts our principles to the test in the Rohingya crisis. Crimes against humanity have taken place. They are driving one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes of our times. The UN said that ‘the situation seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing’.

Our report gives a voice to Rohingya women and men who continue to suffer as a result of such abuses. It has brought back painful memories for me of the Rwandan genocide and its exodus that took place in my own region in 1994. I say ‘continue to suffer’ deliberately. Rohingya people – most of all women and children – are actively threatened by violence and human trafficking in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. That is why Oxfam puts protection at the heart of its response. Meanwhile, international donors are giving so little to the UN to help make Rohingya refugees safer.

Rohingya refugees are left caught between two fears. First is the fear that their overcrowded camps may somehow get worse, as cyclones destroy shelter and spread deadly disease. Second, Rohingya refugees fear being forced back to Myanmar, knowing that the persecution that drove them away re-awaits them. Myanmar and Bangladesh’s recent bilateral agreement on returns has not addressed this.

There are things to commend amidst the crisis. In our age of ugly intolerance of refugees, Bangladesh has kept its borders open and accepted Rohingya in their hundreds of thousands. It can go one step better and recognize them as refugees.

Oxfam’s response has reached more than 185,000 Rohingya people. It is driven by our Bangladesh team, and involves our global humanitarian experts who are Bangladeshi and have spent their lives tackling crises around the world. I am so proud of them and our partners and allies working across this crisis. Oxfam has long been committed to Myanmar and Bangladesh in their struggles to overcome poverty.

But I am outraged at the international community. It is failing to put the human rights of all, including the Rohingya, at the heart of its diplomacy – as it should be. It is failing to fund the refugee crisis in Bangladesh, or, so far at least, to help develop a long-term plan to support not only Rohingya refugees, but the local communities in Bangladesh as well.

These are political choices. All could be reversed with brave diplomacy. Equal rights for all, as full citizens: that is the basic and fundamental call from the Rohingya women and men in this paper. Their call must now be met by the world.

**Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International**

# 'PLEASE TELL MY VOICE TO THE WORLD'

Those are the words of Nur Alum, a 65-year-old man in Balukhali camp, Bangladesh. Another refugee, Siphu Salah, said that 'no-one has ever come to talk to me like this. No-one has ever asked me my story. What I am saying is for the world.'

In this report, Oxfam tries to do justice to their hopes. So that anyone interested in this crisis can read it alongside the evidence that led Amnesty International to report that: 'Witness accounts, satellite imagery and data, and photo and video evidence all point to the same conclusion: Myanmar's security forces unleashed an attack against the Rohingya population in its entirety.'<sup>8</sup>

Human Rights Watch concluded the same. Since 25 August, it said, 'nearly all of the attacks Human Rights Watch has documented have involved Burmese government military operations using mortars, artillery, anti-personnel landmines and small arms against Rohingya villagers.'<sup>9</sup>



**'The army attacked the village. My father was killed. My husband is missing. I ran with the children.'**

Habiba fled with her three children to Kutupalong camp, Bangladesh. Photo: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

The UN fact-finding mission led by Indonesia's former Attorney-General has said that 'although the total number of deaths is unknown, it may turn out to be extremely high.' One of its experts, Radhika Coomaraswamy from Sri Lanka, added that 'the accounts of sexual violence that I heard from victims are some of the most horrendous I have heard.'<sup>10</sup>

**'I feel safe here [in Bangladesh]. But my heart is broken. My land is back there. I feel very sad because the military killed my relatives and so many people.'**

Jafar Ahmed, a 41-year-old man in Kutupalong camp, Bangladesh

**Please turn to page 15 for Oxfam's recommendations**

**'Young girls were tortured in front of us. Young men were slaughtered in front of us. Whoever could survive fled here.'**

Rowida Huque, a 55-year-old widow in Kutupalong camp, Bangladesh



# OXFAM AT WORK IN THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS, BANGLADESH AND MYANMAR

Right now, Oxfam is ramping up its work to improve hygiene and sanitation in the camps in Bangladesh – in the face of the cyclone season which could wash away shelters, spread water-borne disease and raise the risk of a deadly outbreak of cholera.

Since September, Oxfam has provided emergency relief to more than 185,000 Rohingya refugees. We have supplied water tanks, water treatment plants and containers for clean drinking water; portable toilets and sanitation facilities; 70 tons of rice, 23 tons of sugar, and 23,000 fortified biscuit packs; and dignity kits with hygiene items for women, girls, and children. We work with the Bangladesh government and other agencies to try to make sure that new refugee camps will meet humanitarian standards for the delivery of aid, and that women and children are safe.

Oxfam's response to this crisis is above and beyond its long-term work in Bangladesh and Myanmar, where Oxfam helped more than 400,000 and 500,000 people, respectively, in 2015/16; and its response to 2017's devastating monsoon which left two-thirds of Bangladesh under water.

**'In the early 1990s I was part of the Oxfam team providing emergency water to Rohingya refugees who had fled violence over the border. This current crisis is far bigger and more complex, with close to a million people in need of support. For more than three months Oxfam has been working with both international and Bangladeshi organizations to support more than 185,000 people with aid including clean drinking water, toilets and showers.'**

Enamul Hoque, from Dhaka in Bangladesh, is one of four Bangladeshi engineers who have worked for years for Oxfam in emergencies around the world, and returned to Bangladesh for our response to the Rohingya crisis in 2017.

Refugees carry Oxfam food parcels through Thengkhali camp in Bangladesh. Photo: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam



# FLIGHT FOR THEIR LIVES



A father carries his son across a broken bridge on the edge of Balukhali camp, Bangladesh.  
Photo: Aurélie Marrier d'Unienville

**'Four to five hundred military came. My husband and son were slaughtered in front of my eyes. We ran with whatever we had. Somehow, we saved our lives.'**

Arafa, a 52-year-old woman who had run a shop in Myanmar.

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have told Oxfam countless stories of Myanmar forces killing their loved ones. For many, the fear that drove them from their homes did not stop until they reached Bangladesh. They endured terrible journeys of up to two months or more: moving constantly, sleeping rough, fleeing shooting and landmines. According to accounts gathered by Landmines Monitor, 'antipersonnel mines were laid between Myanmar's two major land crossings with Bangladesh, resulting in casualties among Rohingya refugees.'<sup>11</sup> As Sadak Azuli, a 25-year-old man in Balukhali camp, told Oxfam, 'I didn't see the landmines. But I heard them explode. People died.'

**'The military put petrol around the village. They took the women and raped them. The military took five young girls to the primary school and raped them there. Three of the girls died. Two were released, including my sister.'**

Naha Nur, a 19-year-old man in Balukhali camp

## JOURNEYS OF ENDURANCE

Many Rohingya crossed into Bangladesh, not by land but across rivers or by sea. Some made rafts out of bamboo. Others paid extortionate amounts for boat crossings from their life savings, jewellery or gold. But many also survived by the kindness of strangers – in Myanmar and Bangladesh. 'We had no clothes, we begged from people along the way,' Rofique Zowir, a 30-year-old father of four told Oxfam.

## RAPE AND KILLING

We heard stories of women and girls being raped in the most brutal way. We heard stories of men and boys being rounded up and killed in large numbers. Save the Children has published harrowing 'testimonies of children killed and maimed by the Myanmar military, of children burned alive in their homes, of girls being raped and abused.'<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch has published testimonies of 29 survivors of rape by Myanmar security forces, all but one of which was a gang rape.<sup>13</sup>



## HISTORY OF ABUSE

Discrimination and abuse of Rohingya in Myanmar is not new. Those who had fled in the past 20 to 25 years told Oxfam of forced labour at the hands of the army, and confiscation of their land without compensation. Much of the legal context for the effective deprivation of rights for Rohingya is in Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively rendered most of them stateless. For years, Rohingya have been persecuted by discriminatory policies that appear to have been aimed at containing and controlling Muslims in Rakhine, one of Myanmar's poorest states.

The most recent conflicts in Rakhine can be traced back to 2012, when communal violence and rioting broke out between the ethnic Rakhine and the Rohingya communities. Tension between the two communities has been high ever since. But every person we spoke to said that the scale and intensity of violence in 2017 was worse than ever before.



**'Even the kids are traumatized by the thoughts of the military. Even here [in Bangladesh], when they see soldiers, they say "Mum, the military is here, let's hide in the hills!"'**

Romida, who was heavily pregnant when she walked for 10 days to reach safety in Bangladesh.

**'There is no peace for our Rohingya, no solution, no justice. We cannot go in the jungle to find firewood. We cannot go fishing. Before we could. In my childhood, it was more peaceful. Now day by day, it gets worse.'**

Kulusamar Saddiq, a 104-year-old woman in Balukhali camp.

## THREE MONTHS ON IN BANGLADESH NOW

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**‘People in local [Bangladeshi] villages would give us food, and we drank water from streams.’**

Setara lives in Balukhali camp with her seven children

In a year of devastating floods, Bangladesh kept its borders open, and received more than 600,000 Rohingya in two months. That number would stretch the capacity of any government. Most people arrived with almost nothing at all. An extraordinary Bangladeshi and international effort sprang into action. But the pressure to meet the needs of so many people so quickly meant that speed was prioritized over quality. More than 20,000 latrines were put up without a central plan, or necessarily to international standards.<sup>14</sup>

Now after three months, the Rohingya still survive in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, reliant on aid, and facing increasing risks to get food, fuel, and to reach markets. Their camps lack services and infrastructure, including lighting – vital for safety. The humanitarian effort lacks a strong vision or coordination, and tensions with local communities are growing.

But international funds have not kept on coming. By 6 December, the UN appeal for Rohingya had received only 35% of the US\$434m needed until February.<sup>15</sup> This is even less than governments gave to most UN humanitarian appeals, which in 2017, on average, received 54% of the funds needed.<sup>16</sup>

## MORE THAN MONEY

But the Rohingya response needs more than just money. The Bangladesh government has welcomed one of the fastest movements of people in history, and even before that hosted far more than its fair share of the world’s refugees. So many refugees repeatedly told Oxfam, ‘finally we have peace.’<sup>17</sup> More than anything, they seem relieved to have arrived, and grateful to Bangladesh to be safe.

But the response is bedevilled by an assumption that most Rohingya may leave soon; only projects lasting two or three months get approval. As one Bangladeshi NGO leader has warned, the monsoon season beginning in April is not far away, ‘when many of the houses in the Rohingya refugee camp – built on the sides of hills and small ravines – will slide away because of rain.’<sup>18</sup>

The response has also been hampered by the reluctance of Bangladesh to allocate sufficient land to accommodate the refugees according to international humanitarian standards; to allow humanitarian agencies to expand their work as rapidly as needed, and by failing to recognize Rohingya as refugees.



## UNEQUAL AID



**‘We need proper shelter, and must be able to move freely outside, and need full rations for my family.’**

Younis Kadir, a 60-year-old man in Kutupalong camp.

Dirty water in Kutupalong camp extension, Bangladesh. Photo: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

In contrast, in the early 1990s, Bangladesh recognized arriving Rohingya as refugees. More than 33,000 of them still live in refugee camps,<sup>19</sup> receiving regular food rations and other assistance from UNHCR and other international organizations

The hundreds of thousands who have followed them since then do not receive similar treatment. The Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh between 1997 and 2016 are referred to as ‘undocumented Myanmar nationals,’ not registered as refugees, and not receiving food rations. They survive instead on daily wages, working as labourers outside the refugee camps. In a crisis driven by so many injustices, a less visible one is the inequality in treating one Rohingya in Bangladesh differently from another, only dependent on when they arrived.

## SEEKING SAFETY

Rohingya refugees express their profound relief at having reached safety in Bangladesh, but also reveal the dangers and difficulties they still face. ‘Bangladesh does not let us go out of the camps,’ Salah Hussein, one man in Kutupalong said. ‘There are checkpoints so we can’t leave without being stopped.’ Rohingya cannot gain employment within the camps.

The refugees have experienced traumatic events. Many not only have significant psychological needs, but also face serious threats now, even in Bangladesh, as Oxfam’s protection assessment in November found (summarized on pages 10 and 11). Gender-based violence, forced prostitution and human trafficking are among the greatest threats. Many refugees try to reduce the threat by spreading word about the risk of abduction of girls and young men, and of violence. But as our assessment set out, others find that the only way to survive is through extreme measures, such as early child marriage, polygamy, and ‘survival sex’ in exchange for protection. As the UN reported on 14 November, ‘with almost no alternative source of income, refugees are willing to take whatever opportunities they are presented with, even ones that are risky, dangerous and that involve their children.’<sup>20</sup>

Every single refugee deserves better protection. This is one of Oxfam’s highest priorities. Yet this reality – that safety must be at the heart of the response – does not fit with the preconceptions of donor governments or the Bangladesh government of what humanitarian needs should be. International donors have, by 6 December, given only 24% of what the UN seeks to protect refugees. Meanwhile, funds for nutrition have been relatively easy to raise, and almost 94% of funding requested has now been received.<sup>21</sup>

# SAFETY IN THE CAMPS



**‘Women cannot make money. They cannot even go outside.’**

Male focus group participant

Woman in Kutupalong camp. Photo: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

Among the interviews conducted for this report, Oxfam conducted 23 focus groups and spoke with 66 individuals in Bangladesh in November, as part of a wider assessment to plan its programme and inform the wider humanitarian response.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the refugees in these groups and interviews had seen or suffered terrible violence. Many female participants constantly mentioned the events they had witnessed in their last days in Myanmar, no matter what subject was discussed.

Nine out of ten interviews mentioned psycho-social support as one of the most important needs; 85% mentioned treatment for the survivors of sexual violence.

The refugees reported five main issues in the camps in Bangladesh now, where day-to-day activities can still be life-threatening. They acknowledged the work done by the Bangladesh authorities and local leaders to maintain security, but still faced serious threats.

## 1 LACK OF LIGHTING

None of the male and female participants of our focus groups felt safe at night. Young children, girls and women have all disappeared as human trafficking becomes an increasing concern. The lack of lighting, makeshift shelters without doors, and overcrowding have combined to make kidnapping a real threat.

Both men and women spoke of the threat of sexual violence at night. Female-headed households are particularly vulnerable – as are child-headed households, of which there are tragically many after all the separations and deaths on the flight from Myanmar.

## 2 REDUCED FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT FOR WOMEN

When Rohingya women fled Myanmar, they lost most of their possessions, including clothing. Their lack of adequate clothing affects their ability to move around freely in public – while the lack of appropriate clothing reduces their ability to leave their shelters, and therefore to go to latrines, bathing facilities and waterpoints. Some women are even reducing their food and water intake to avoid having to use latrines by daylight.

### 3 COLLECTING FIREWOOD

Very few refugees can pay for firewood; they go into the forest to get it. All men in our groups described this as one of their most dangerous activities. Some, particularly children, have simply never returned. Collecting firewood creates tension with local communities; every group reported intimidation, theft, bribery and physical assaults. And inevitably, with hundreds of thousands of new arrivals, the supply of wood is dwindling, requiring refugees to trek deeper into the forest, and danger, to gather it.

### 4 INCREASE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Every one of our female groups said that women don't feel safe using latrines, which are not for women only and don't have lockable doors. They spoke of an increasing risk of sexual and gender-based violence. More than half of our focus groups reported girls and young women being approached by people they referred to as 'foreigners' and recruited for 'jobs' outside the camp. Some have left, and their families have lost track of them.

### 5 LACK OF INFORMATION

Even where services exist, many refugees don't know about them. In 20 of our 23 groups, they did not know of the women's safe spaces or psycho-social support. There is little information to help refugees find their way around the vast overcrowded camps. This means that they prefer to stay in their own blocks, and keep their children near them, for fear of them getting lost or being kidnapped for sex or human trafficking.

#### Prospects for return to Myanmar

Oxfam asked refugees about their hopes for the future. Men could only envisage going back to Myanmar if their safety and dignity as Rohingya, and equal rights with others, could be guaranteed. The discussions with women, however, were different. Women quickly became extremely distressed at the prospect of return, some speaking of the horrific gender-based violence that was part of their flight and is now a very big part of their fear of return.

*'Even if they provide us land and property, we don't want to go back. They cut the breasts off women and played with them. They killed children by throwing them in fires. We prefer you to pile us up here, if we are forced to go back we will set ourselves on fire.'*

Female focus group participant

*'We've been persecuted for many years. Whenever we go back they kill more of us, so what is our future to be? We want Myanmar citizenship as Rohingya people. Otherwise there is no going back.'*

Male focus group participant



# HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?



View of Kutupalong refugee camp extension. Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

**'I want to go back to my home – when we are treated as citizens, when there is no violence, when women are not tortured and kidnapped, when at last we can be free.'**

Fatima Sultan, a 20-year-old woman who fled Myanmar in early September.

Oxfam asked refugees: *What are your hopes for the future?* Most found that difficult to answer. 'We cannot say what we are hoping for,' Asmina Osman, a 45-year-old woman in Kutupalong said. 'We just came here to live and survive.'

Rohingya refugees told Oxfam of their longing to return home, but an almost unanimous fear that it is not safe now. With new Rohingya refugees arriving every week, they fear that people are still being killed. As Nur Alum, a 65-year-old man said, 'there is still discrimination, burning and torturing.'

Several women in particular told Oxfam that they would kill themselves rather than return to Myanmar. Some men did too. Their words flew in the face of the bilateral agreement's assumption that Rohingya will voluntarily return to Myanmar within months. Men tended to countenance return more easily than women, but only if their Rohingya identity and equal rights could be guaranteed. Rofique Zowir, a 30-year-old father of four said: 'if we could live freely like other people, and go wherever we want to, if you can assure us we would be free. Then we would go back.'

## RETURNING TO WHERE?

Many refugees stressed that if they went back, they wanted to go home to their village, not to camps for displaced people, or another settlement. Salah Hussein explained why. 'Some people have been living in camps for displaced people,' he said. 'They have little food and assistance. The same will happen to us if we go back to camps.' As 50-year-old Isharat Azuli said, 'I want to go back to my home and my land.'

## RETURNING TO WHAT?

Again and again, we heard that Rohingya would not feel safe to return until they have equal rights in Myanmar. 'I want the Burmese government to accept us as Rohingya,' one 30-year-old man, Jafar Saddiq said, 'and grant us full citizenship and rights before I return.' For many, the importance of equal rights was rooted in a lifetime's experience. Salah Hussein, aged 50, has now fled Myanmar three times, having also fled in 1978 and 1991. 'Each time I came, I went back,' he said. But 'without full citizenship, I cannot go back this time. So many times, the [Bangladesh and Myanmar] governments negotiated and we were repatriated back. But we had to leave again and flee for our lives.'

Several Rohingya also raised the difficulty of returning without documents to prove their identity or ownership of what they had lost. 'I owned cows, cattle and a house,' 60-year-old Younis Kadir said. 'I had documents showing ownership of my house and my compound. But I wasn't able to bring them as we ran for our lives.'

Many others told Oxfam how they had seen their cattle and crops looted or destroyed. Almost every person we spoke to who had fled in 2016 or 2017 had had their homes burnt down.<sup>23</sup> Fatima Sultan had lost something more basic. 'I had a family list, and census card to prove that I lived in Myanmar. I had an ID card but it says that I am Bengali. My documents and ID were left behind when we were escaping. They have been burnt along with everything else. We escaped with only the clothes on our backs.'



**'If we're kicked out of here, I will jump in the river and die. I won't go back.'**

Rowida Huque, a 55-year-old widow in Kutupalong

### **The Arrangement between Bangladesh and Myanmar: 23 November 2017**

The Arrangement includes the right language on refugee returns, in line with international standards on refugee repatriation: that it must be completely voluntary, and in safety, security, and dignity. But the most glaring flaw in the Arrangement is the starting date: two months after it was made on 23 November. It is difficult to imagine how returns can be voluntary when refugees continue to arrive in Bangladesh, traumatized from their experiences, and exhausted from their arduous journeys. And it is hard to conceive how repatriation in such a near future could be in safety and dignity, and sustainable. Bangladesh and Myanmar need time to put in place practical preparations for return, and – for Myanmar – the lasting political and legal reform that would enable refugees to return truly voluntarily and in safety and dignity.

## RETURNING TO MYANMAR - WHEN?

Oxfam asked Rohingya refugees whether they thought things would change in Myanmar. Most said no. Most could not see the prospect of going home in the foreseeable future, unless there are fundamental changes in Myanmar. But some spoke of other options. 'I'd go to another country, but I don't know where,' 50-year-old Salah Hussein said. 'Anywhere as long as we are safe. But if the situation remains as it is, I don't have hope of returning.'

Reflecting on these hopes and fears, several things seem clear. The first is that it is too early for refugees to contemplate return while Rakhine state remains volatile, and the rights of Rohingya to legal recognition, freedom of movement, and full access to basic services, including health and education, have not been guaranteed in Myanmar. As the *Dhaka Tribune* reported in November, having interviewed more than a hundred Rohingya men and women, most 'are ready to go home only if the Myanmar government ensures their basic human rights and ethnic identity.'<sup>24</sup>

The second is that the Rohingya in Bangladesh clearly meet the Refugee Convention's definition of a refugee: a *person [with] a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.*<sup>25</sup> But the third is that the current situation in Bangladesh is not sustainable. Cox's Bazaar, the southerly district where most Rohingya refugees are, is one of Bangladesh's poorest areas. In 2016, 27% of the population had 'crisis level' food insecurity.<sup>26</sup> The threat of cyclones or flooding is always there. As Oxfam's protection assessment found out, tensions between local communities and refugees have already resulted in violence.

The decent answer is not to deny Rohingya refugee status. It is to make sure that local communities in Bangladesh *and* refugees have the support and opportunities they need – to earn their living, to access essential services and to be free – including for Rohingya to move out of their camps. To help do that, Bangladesh has every right to ask for far more international support than it has so far received. So far, few are looking to the long term. But as a Bangladeshi NGO leader said at the end of November, 'a more considered response would be to see this humanitarian disaster also as a developmental opportunity. The international community has the chance to invest in the future of a people that have been historically excluded and marginalised...Development initiatives must go beyond the camps and into the surrounding areas...[to support] the local community in Cox's Bazar which has been remarkably hospitable.'<sup>27</sup>



**'Even if the government here throws us out, we will not go. Many times we have been refugees. We cannot go back. Our children and grandchildren were slaughtered in front of our eyes.'**

Nur Alum, a 65-year-old man in Balukhali camp.

Nur Alum fled in the 1970s, 1990s, and now again in 2017 – with his elderly mother who was a refugee for the first time in the 1940s, and for whom 2017 is the fourth time she has had to flee her country. Photo: Oxfam



# RECOMMENDATIONS



Shohide 6, collects water from a dirty stream. Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

**‘I can’t go back safely. I hope the Bangladesh government will allow us to remain, and give us refugee status. If not I can’t say what will happen.’**

Younis Kadir, a 60-year-old man in Kutapalong camp

This report’s conclusion is simple: everyone should take account of the views of Rohingya refugees. That is the message for the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar. But also for other governments in the region and elsewhere, for the UN, and for NGOs like Oxfam too.

The conditions for a safe return to Myanmar do not exist now. To coerce the Rohingya back now would violate a cornerstone of international law, *non-refoulement*. Myanmar and Bangladesh’s bilateral agreement on 23 November rightly recognized that return should be voluntary and in safety, security and dignity. But the agreement falls short of providing the preconditions needed to meet some of the Rohingya refugees’ central hopes of equal rights, including freedom of movement, access to services, and citizenship. Its aim to begin within two months, and to be completed within a ‘reasonable timeframe’, took no notice of refugees’ fears that the situation in Myanmar that drove them away has not fundamentally changed.

One day, safe and sustainable return to Myanmar may be possible, if the equal rights of Rohingya men, women and children can at last be upheld. But the vital job now is to help Rohingya refugees live safe and dignified lives in Bangladesh.

Listening to Rohingya refugees’ voices, the following are the challenges.

## **‘WE DON’T WANT TO GO BACK TO MYANMAR.’**

Rohida, a Rohingya woman who fled after her uncle, brothers and cousins were killed

- Bangladesh to sign the Refugee Convention, and to respect the entirely voluntary return of Rohingya refugees, as the UN has called for, without direct or indirect coercion;<sup>28</sup>
- Myanmar to guarantee Rohingya refugees a dignified, voluntary and safe return, inviting the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to help develop and implement a process complying with international standards, monitored by independent observers, and ensuring that refugees’ right to return is not impeded by the process to verify Myanmar citizenship, and that they can return to their homes and not camps for displaced people;

- Myanmar to guarantee the rights of Rohingya to freedom of movement, and to compensation or restitution for land and property confiscated or destroyed, alongside the equal rights of all other communities in Myanmar;
- Myanmar to listen to all communities in Rakhine State, to understand their concerns around the planned return of refugees, and set out how to promote greater harmony between communities, *without* segregated camps and settlements, and to ensure that economic and social development benefits all;
- Myanmar to implement the Advisory Committee on Rakhine State's recommendations to reform laws that deny full citizenship to the Rohingya; to 'establish a clear strategy and timeline for the citizenship verification process'; and to 'immediately ensure that those who are verified as citizens enjoy all benefits, rights and freedoms associated with citizenship';
- Myanmar to implement those recommendations in a way that upholds the human rights of all communities and all people. Before a verification process takes place in Rakhine state, it should take steps to restore confidence in that process, and to set out the status and rights of those who do not qualify as citizens, and a clear route to citizenship after the verification process;
- Bangladesh, IOM, OCHA and UNHCR to develop plans to support both Rohingya refugees and local communities in Bangladesh, including through cash-based programming, and livelihood support for local communities;
- Bangladesh to implement a 'progressive removal of restrictions' on the rights and freedoms of refugees, including those who have been in Bangladesh for years and are self-sufficiently living outside camps in the local Bangladeshi community – with the support and experience of UNHCR on 'Alternatives to Camps' around the world.



Hasira, 8 years old, carries a jar of drinking water from a local water pump for her family in Balukhali camp.  
Photo: Aurélie Marrier d'Unienville

## **'PEOPLE ARE BEING KILLED AND SLAUGHTERED.'**

Sumaya, a Rohingya woman who walked for 14 days to reach safety in Bangladesh

- The Myanmar authorities to ensure that all violence is stopped, ensure the protection of all civilians, and allow unhindered humanitarian access throughout Rakhine State, based on need;
- Myanmar to ensure that landmines and improvised explosive devices are not used, and remove all those that have been laid;
- Myanmar to hold to account the perpetrators of human rights violations in Rakhine State.

## 'WE ARE HERE WITH OUR LIVES ONLY.'

Arafa, a 52-year-old Rohingya woman in Bangladesh

- International donors to fund the Rohingya refugee response plan and disburse funds now;
- Bangladesh, the UN, and international agencies to end the congestion of refugee sites, and plan new sites in line with Sphere<sup>29</sup> and Core Humanitarian Standards;<sup>30</sup>
- Bangladesh, the UN, and international agencies to treat all Rohingya in Bangladesh equitably, irrespective of when they arrived, with equal rights and access to assistance and protection;
- Bangladesh, the UN, and international agencies to ensure that their response addresses the specific needs of women and girls, including of female-headed households, to both protection and assistance
- Bangladesh to recognize all Rohingya as refugees, whether they arrived before or after August 2017, and allow UNHCR to lead the international part of the response;
- Bangladesh to give Rohingya information cards to provide access to basic services. It should allow refugees to seek livelihoods outside the camps, and to explore cash interventions to reduce their vulnerability to exploitation;
- Bangladesh to work with UNHCR to ensure the protection and assistance of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and in any repatriation or return process;
- UNHCR to coordinate a protection<sup>1</sup> assessment and response for all refugees, including specific interventions to reduce the risk of trafficking and SGBV, and with the vital input from women's rights organizations;
- Bangladesh, the UN, and international agencies to support a systematic way to record the documents that Rohingya refugees hold and have lost or left behind in Myanmar, to support their claims on return, and record their citizenship or residency in Myanmar.



There are almost 50,000 Rohingya refugees living in Kutupalong camp, many with inadequate shelter and limited access to clean water and latrines. Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, protection means the activities that UNHCR and other agencies do to help keep people safe; whether from violence and coercion or from being deprived of the assistance they need. This includes specific activities, and 'safe programming': the vital need to ensure that all humanitarian activities do not inadvertently create greater risks for those they are trying to reach, or exacerbate conflict.



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**'They were slaughtering people, that's why we fled.'**

Laila fled to Kutupalong camp, Bangladesh with her husband and baby son.

## METHODOLOGY

This report is based on interviews with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh conducted between September and November 2017 by Oxfam staff, and on its Rapid Protection, Food Security and Market Assessment conducted between 3 and 9 November.

The interviews included those of 14 women and 14 men in Kutupalong MS/Balukhali MS + Extension and Kutupalong RC camps between 15 and 17 November.

The assessment included 12 female-only and 11 male-only focus group discussions, and 66 key informant interviews. These took place in two makeshift camps (Kutupalong North and South), two spontaneous sites (zone TT and JJ), one extension zone (zone OO) and the camp in Unchiprang.

All the names of people in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

The purpose of our interviews was to allow Rohingya refugees to speak for themselves, not to gather evidence of a human rights violation or other event.

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Front cover: Razida, 35, carries her ten-month-old son Anisul through Unchiprang camp in Bangladesh. Photo: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

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Shim, 12, holds an Oxfam food parcel. Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

## LAST WORDS

**'We feel safer here [in Bangladesh]. Even though we worry about food and other needs. At least it is peaceful.'**

Fatima Sultan, a 20-year-old woman in Kutupalong Camp who fled Myanmar in the first week of September

**'I want to stay in Bangladesh. I don't want to go back. Everything is burnt. Our cattle and land has been taken away.'**

Rukia Khatum, a 65-year-old woman who left Myanmar in early September

**'If we could live freely like other people and go wherever we want, if you can assure us we would be free, then we could go back. . '**

Rofique Zowir, a 30-year-old man with four children in Kutupalong Extension Camp, Bangladesh