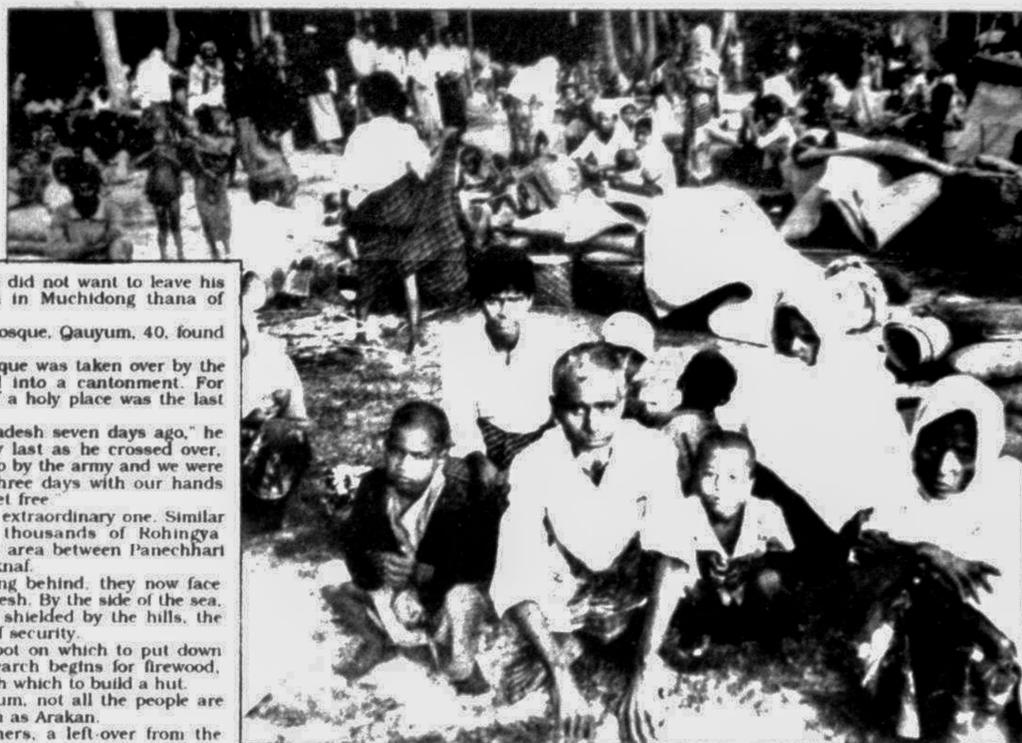


Tales of Sufferings of Refugees from Myanmar



Reported by A K M Mohsin
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Out of Myanmar junta reach, on the bank of the river Naf on the Bangladesh side. But uncertainty writ large on their faces.



Under the open sky, Rohingya refugees look for help.



Calamities — natural or man-made — leave children the worst sufferers. Rohingya children are no exception.



After fleeing Myanmar junta atrocities, these Rohingya women are waiting for ration cards at Katu Palong camp.



Rohingya refugee camps betray awful lacking of the minimum living facilities.

TEKNAF: Abdul Qauyum did not want to leave his home village of Bonalpara in Muchidong thana of Rakhaine in Myanmar.

The imam of his village mosque, Qauyum, 40, found he had little choice.

Few weeks back, his mosque was taken over by the Myanmar army and turned into a cantonment. For Qauyum, this desecration of a holy place was the last straw.

"I tried to come to Bangladesh seven days ago," he told The Daily Star Tuesday last as he crossed over, "but our group was picked up by the army and we were kept locked in a room for three days with our hands and legs tied, before being set free."

Qauyum's story is not an extraordinary one. Similar tales can be heard from thousands of Rohingya refugees crowding a 50-mile area between Panecchhari near Cox's Bazar down to Teknaf.

Having left their everything behind, they now face an uncertain time in Bangladesh. By the side of the sea, on more or less flat ground shielded by the hills, the refugees try to find a sense of security.

As soon as they find a spot on which to put down their last belongings, the search begins for firewood, and for sticks and straws with which to build a hut.

According to Abdul Qauyum, not all the people are fleeing Rakhaine, once known as Arakan.

Most of the rich landowners, a left-over from the feudal age, have remained behind even in the face of a determined effort by the Myanmar army to depopulate the province of Rohingyas. The zeminders are obviously too much in love with their precious property to care about their or their families' lives.

Apparently, the Myanmar army is not so much interested in killing innocent Rohingyas, as driving them out of their ancestral homes. People suspected of being involved with armed resistance groups are killed outright, but others are simply terrorised or evicted from their land to make way for non-Rohingya colonisation, Qauyum believes.

However, the troops make sure the refugees leave with as few valuables in their possessions as possible. Gold jewellery is a particularly favourite item for looting by the soldiers.

The ordeal of the refugees does not end at the Bangladesh border, it merely begins a new phase.

Having bribed Myanmar border guards to the tune of Taka 60 per refugee and paid Taka 40 per head for the boat ride across the Naaf river which forms a major portion of the 176-mile border, the new arrivals are then confronted by local touts.

The touts operate as money changers, relieving the refugees of their Myanmar kyats, which is useless in Bangladesh, in exchange for takas.

The rate of exchange, of course, is stacked heavily in favour of the touts. The refugees, tired and distraught after having been forced to flee their homes, and without anyone to care for them in Bangladesh, have little choice but to accept whatever rate the touts agree to give.

That is not all. Many touts then "persuade" the refugees to part with the pieces of jewellery and whatever other valuable item they might have been able to bring ashore. They need the takas badly to buy food to stay alive.

Even village children have had to part with their pet chickens, their "playmates" back home which they had refused to leave behind, in order to raise some money for the family. The chickens are often sold to local villagers or touts for next to nothing. For the kids, the heartbreak is then complete.

At the crossing points, there is hardly any official presence, save for odd soldier of the Bangladesh Rifles here and there. Most refugees arrive with no one there to register them or even guide them.

There is hardly any official or non-government organisation (NGO) there to transport them to a camp where relief could be available. In the event, they try to build a home wherever they can, without the slightest idea about where their next meal is going to come from.

Amir Hussain and his family, along with hundreds others, arrived more than 10 days ago. They are yet to receive any card with which to collect relief from officially-designated camps. Hussain, 30, can only sit under his shabby hut at Kutupalong and wait.

The children at these makeshift "camps" are the worst sufferers. Baby food and fresh drinking water are scarce commodity and diarrhoea is already spreading. The grown-ups may survive, but over 200 children have already died.

Thousands of people are living under the open sky, without any hope or help. Their condition cannot be described as anything other than an inhuman one. And their numbers are growing by the day.

The Daily Star Goes to Border for a Close Look at Rohingyas' Plight

Photo by A K M Mohsin



It looks like a school. But a close scrutiny reveals that bunkers have been dug on the premise of this house on the Myanmar side.



Rohingyas arriving from Mandu are enlisted for registration at Teknaf.