

For a people, who not long ago fled from persecution in the dead of night and undertook a dangerous border crossing by dawn, the cyclone last week may have reawakened fears of leaving behind their homes and losing their loved ones.

Rohingya new arrivals had just begun to settle into their temporary huts in various settlements across Cox's Bazar, around six months on from fleeing Myanmar in an exodus, which saw thousands cross the border between October 2016 and February 2017 into the relative safety of Bangladesh. Privations followed, a plan to relocate them to a remote flood-prone island led to fears of being uprooted again, but the worst was yet to come.

Cyclone Mora, for which the Bangladesh Meteorological Department issued a "great danger signal 10", saw seven killed, 50 injured, and over 300,000 evacuated. Ripping through the south-east of Bangladesh, the cyclone felled numerous trees hampering access to affected areas.

Hafiz Shafiq and his small family have been residents at Balukhali, a new site for recent arrivals, for around seven months now. The settlement is estimated to host over 2000 households. Shafiq's home was among the 10,000 thatched huts ravaged by the cyclone in Balukhali and Kutupalong makeshift settlements.

"My hut is destroyed. Even if I am able to fix it up again, what good will it be? When another storm comes, our huts will again be destroyed."

As many as 70 percent of undocumented Rohingya refugees live in three makeshift camps in Balukhali, Kutupalong, and Leda. The camps are overcrowded and unsanitary, with the barest of infrastructure. The refugees live in flimsy huts, densely packed together, which are little more than plastic sheets held together with bamboo poles. It is little surprise that the storm destroyed so many homes and damaged vital health and sanitation infrastructure in the camps. An estimated 17,000 families lost their homes to the cyclone.

Around 6 a.m. on the morning of May 30, when the cyclone made landfall, Shafiq, his wife and infant son were scattered suddenly by strong winds which took off their roof. The family fled to the big mosque inside the settlement, the only structure strong enough to withstand the lashing winds. Cowed, they and other Rohingya refugees stayed there for most part of the day, even after the storm had died down in the afternoon.

"If we had been alerted earlier, I would have made plans for my family's removal to a safe place." The only warning Shafiq had about the incoming storm was some miking done at around 10 p.m. at night, which he heard from his hut. This was a time when most people in the camp had already settled in for the night. Thus, the next day saw most refugees in their homes instead of in safer structures when the cyclone struck.

For now, Shafiq's family has moved into the home of another Rohingya family who were able to patch up their damaged hut. Though many refugees in the settlement have begun fixing their huts, Shafiq cannot afford it.



CYCLONE MORA BATTERS ROHINGYA HOMES

Flimsy huts and lack of early warning in the camps lead to considerable damage

MALIHA KHAN

PHOTOS: SHINJI KUBO/UNHCR



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alleges that early warning failed. He remembers hearing some miking about strong winds very early in the morning, shortly before the storm began. "There was no time to prepare. Within minutes, the winds demolished many of our homes."

Like Shafiq, Karim has no source of income. Unable to replace the polythene sheets torn away by the winds, he cannot repair the damaged roof of his hut. Buying these and the bamboo necessary will cost around Tk 2,000, he says. "In

camps. The day before the cyclone hit, camp authorities disseminated necessary information about the impending cyclone to the community. Precautions taken include the evacuation of pregnant women, designation of schools and mosques (sturdier structures) inside the camps as safe shelters, and keeping doctors on standby.

However, even in the official camps, most homes have seen some damage. These camps, situated in Nayapara and Kutupalong, are run by UNHCR and house more than 33,000 Rohingya refugees who are recognised by the government. According to Joseph Tripura, designated spokesperson for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 20

at the very least and known to take shelter before the cyclone hit, avoiding the panic that took place.

There were no attempts made to evacuate the undocumented Rohingya community, though they lived in particularly vulnerable areas in poorly made huts. Aid agencies are overwhelmed, both IOM and UNHCR having launched appeals for funds to fulfill immediate needs of those affected by the cyclone. The government does not recognise the refugees living in makeshift settlements.

Joint Secretary Md. Aowlad Hossain Khan, head of the Refugee Cell at the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, says his office took all necessary



What little the Rohingya refugees had was lost in the cyclone. Yet again, they have to start the laborious process of rebuilding their homes and lives.

Shafiq still has no source of income though as a trained Hafez, he leads prayers and teaches Rohingya children at the very madrasa that sheltered him and others during the cyclone. His family subsists on the 25 kg of rice provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) every fortnight.

Shafiq is one of the estimated 74,000 recent arrivals in Cox's Bazar, having fled the violence in Rakhine state of Myanmar in October 2016. There were already an estimated 300,000–500,000 undocumented Rohingya refugees living in the country.

Over at the Kutupalong makeshift settlement, C-2 block leader Fazal Karim says his home was flooded and that an uprooted tree fell on it. In his block, there have been no casualties, save some injuries from the flying debris and trees uprooted during the cyclone. The settlement is host to an estimated 12,000 households.

Karim's family lost all their possessions to the cyclone, meager as they were – a water filter, *kolshi*, and mosquito nets. These were the sole belongings of a family of seven, which comprise his wife and their three children, and his two sisters. The family fasted without taking any food the day and night.

Karim and the other residents of block C-2 were inside their homes when the cyclone hit in the early morning. He too,

Bangladesh, our huts are all we have. As long as we have these, we can somehow get by. If this too is taken from us, how will we survive?" asks Karim.

Those unable to patch up their homes themselves or pay for lost and damaged shelter materials, are now living under the open sky in their cyclone-battered huts. Post-cyclone, relief is slow to arrive. So far, refugees at the Kutupalong makeshift settlement have received only high-energy biscuits distributed by WFP.

Vital health and sanitation infrastructure were also damaged.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which coordinates the work of aid agencies in the makeshift settlements and host communities, is prioritising the repair of water and sanitation facilities. 243 latrines, tube wells, and one health facility are currently compromised.

Official camps see damage too

Unlike in the makeshift settlements, early warning and precautionary measures were in effect in the official

percent of homes have been severely affected. "Our shelter arrangements are fragile," he says.

Refugees themselves have begun repairing their homes. UNHCR staff, unable to provide shelter materials to all those who need it, are providing one plastic sheet per room to "those who need it the most." The agency is focusing particularly on repairing the three schools in the camps, which were among other communal structures destroyed. These sites will then be used to host families currently without a roof over their heads.

Were adequate precautions taken?

The question remains why Rohingya communities in Balukhali and Kutupalong makeshift settlements, and possibly other sites, were not sufficiently prepared for the cyclone. If early warnings had been disseminated via megaphone during daytime the day before, families could have taken precautions regarding their possessions

precautions regarding early warning and is coordinating relief efforts on the ground for the two official camps. "We do not deal with the settlements in Balukhali and Kutupalong," he says.

Damage to a majority of Rohingya homes was inevitable, as seen in the official camps which also saw considerable damage despite prior warning. However, injuries were fewer, treatment prompt, and successful coordination between the local authorities and UNHCR was instrumental in avoiding major casualties in the official camps. Vulnerable refugees such as pregnant

women and the sick were provided additional assistance and are being temporarily accommodated in safer structures.

What now?

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are living a temporary life, though many have been here for years now. Living in fragile homes in dense quarters in the camps, the Rohingya community is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters such as cyclones and flooding. "The need is for sturdy huts, able to withstand such natural disasters," insists Karim. "This would cost around Tk 8,000-10,000," he says. The futility of repairs using the same

materials as before is not lost on Shafiq and Karim.

What little the Rohingya refugees had was lost in the cyclone. Yet again, they have to start the laborious process of rebuilding their homes and lives. Patching up their huts and relief efforts in the short-term do little to address the long-term problems of their cramped living quarters, lack of livelihood opportunities to better their lives, and their future in this country. Rohingya refugees came to Bangladesh seeking shelter from persecution in Myanmar. The cyclone revealed exactly how vulnerable that shelter is. ■

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