

# Alive, barely

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too excited though. They were only allowed to survive, a dark spot in the shining visage of Myanmar's new-found democracy.

Today Khurshida sits in Sadar Hospital, Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, a whole country away, with Hayat lying on the hospital bed, recounting a horror. Hayat's entire body is covered in burns; his eyes are fixed on the ceiling and he whimpers from time to time. He is going through so much pain that even mustering a cry hurts. He does not cry. He only whimpers, softly, a sound of muted anguish.

"At 2:00pm, the military surrounded our house and set it on fire. My older son panicked. He dropped Hayat and ran out of the house," Khurshida remembers. "I ran back inside to get him but a piece of the flaming ceiling had fallen on him," she says. I ask her the name of her elder son, but Khurshida is suddenly distracted. She delicately wraps her pink aanchol around her face, her eyes fixed on Hayat. With her other hand on his forehead she checks his fever. What else can she say? Now is when you want to tell her that everything will be alright and to have faith. But you can't. No one knows what will happen next.

Faith has become a luxurious comfort. Her son, Hayat, is only one-year-old and has already seen and suffered more than any one-year-old should.

On the next bed is six-year-old Faisal. His hand is heavily plastered. He sits with his mother. His eyes are darting everywhere. Is it out of curiosity or fear? "We were running away from the army. They would not stop shooting at us," Faisal's mother says. In the rush, Faisal fell, tumbling down the steep hills, breaking his arm.

A broken arm was better than the fate the Myanmar military had in store for him. Faisal's eyes still retain the gleam of youth unlike Hayat's, who has been robbed of the innocence even before he had the chance to nurture it.

In another room, the first thing that greets you is blood-stained sheets. The patient occupying the bed has been moved for further examinations. A selfish relief washes over, having avoided another gut-wrenching story. But before one can breathe easier, there's more to come.

On the very next bed behind her is Nur Haba. She lifts her bandaged arm to show where the bullet went through. "It was around Fajr. We woke up to the screams of our neighbours who were being slaughtered next door," she says. "As soon as we realised what was happening, we got out and ran towards the hills. The military men were slaughtering everyone in sight and burning all our homes," she adds.

She pauses for a few seconds, collecting herself. As they ran, the army began shooting. "They did not stop shooting. They came suddenly, armed with rocket-propelled grenades. We are farmers. What could we do?" she asks. This is when you ask what you could now do for her apart from offering a few words of consolation. How do you console someone whose suffering refuses to end?

On the bed across sits Sura Khatun with her grand-daughter, Zamila Khatun, a girl who is around 15. She wishes to show the gaping bullet hole in her grand-daughter's back, left after a bullet ripped through her chest. In some twist of fate, the girl survived, the bullet missing any vital organs and

going right through her, leaving behind only a mark and an unforgettable memory.

But at least her grand-daughter was still alive. That must be a small blessing for her, a story of resiliency in the making. But Myanmar's crackdown was not conceived with an option for positive stories; it was about unleashing brutality, one that would haunt the memories of its victims and their future generations for centuries to come.

"My son was shot. My four-year-old grand-son..." she pauses, and then breathes in, her eyes brimming with tears. She wants to continue but doesn't know how to put in words what happened next. "My four-year-old grandson, I saw the bullet go through his head," she says, pointing at her own temple. In that instant her face contorts into a mask of melancholy and she breaks down. She can say no more. But her eyes tell you that Rakhine is no longer her home and can never be again.

Once her sobs subside, she goes back to telling her tale.

"At 1:00 pm, while the men were finishing their prayers, the military surrounded the mosque and started shooting indiscriminately. At least 200 people died," she says. "They wouldn't allow us to go to mosques or madrasas to pray. They allowed us nothing," she concludes wishing to say no more.

Today Sura has her grand-daughter to take care of with the help of a few relatives. Her husband, who was blind, has been missing since the attack.

It was time to leave. Just outside the cabin, the halls filled with the cries of a child. Rushing out, we met 13-year-old Jubair, clinging on to his mother. Shirtless, he clutched his stomach and kept groaning in pain. It was a stomach infection, a nurse informed. When Jubair's mother was handed a prescription for a 15 taka medicine, she slowly led Jubair into a ward, her head bent low, and placed him on the bed. Jubair refused to let go of his mother's arm.

He wasn't shot. He wasn't burned. He had a stomach infection, probably from eating scraps, as that was all they had. But his mother still seemed troubled. Turns out she did not have the 15 taka she needed to save her son from this unbearable pain.

Before we left, Sura called us back and asked us to take a picture of Zamila's bullet wound. She wanted the world to see what had happened to them. Like her, many refugees in the camps had also been willing to tell their stories and show their scars. They firmly believed that if the world saw them and heard them, they would help.

Does anyone have the heart to tell them that the world turned their backs on them a long time ago? Could anyone tell them that the international leaders, who they imagine to be their saviours, refuse to acknowledge their suffering?

In Sadar District Hospital Cox's Bazar, it dawns upon you that there is no point wrapping what happened in fancy packages of nice sounding terms. It is time to call it what it is. This is genocide. Let there be no doubt about it. If Hayat lives, he will not shy away from telling you the same.



A Rohingya child cries with stomach pain as his mother sits by him. Right, Nur Haba, a Rohingya refugee, cannot hold back tears as she recalls her harrowing experiences in Rakhine State. Her husband, a son, a daughter, two grandsons and a daughter-in-law were killed by Myanmar security forces. The photos were taken at the District Sadar Hospital in Cox's Bazar yesterday.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

## 2 lakh children at great risk

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born since their mothers' arrival in Bangladesh.

Rohingyas have been fleeing violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State as Myanmar's security forces began a crackdown in response to the Rohingya insurgents' attacks on police posts and an army base on August 25.

UN Special Rapporteur on human rights Yanghee Lee said the latest violence may have left more than 1,000 dead, most of them Rohingyas. Myanmar, however, says the number of dead is around 430, the majority of them "extremist terrorists" from Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.

Rohingyas allege that the Myanmar forces burned down thousands of Rohingya houses, a claim denied by Myanmar government.

As Rohingyas stream into Bangladesh, the authorities have been struggling to provide food, shelter, water and medicine to the huge number of refugees in such a short period of time.

Jean Lieby said, "This is a growing humanitarian crisis and children are at the heart of this crisis. Sixty percent of all refugees are children."

Referring to the rising number of makeshift shelters, he said it's very important to provide the refugees with safe drinking water and basic sanitation facilities to prevent water-borne diseases.

There are many vulnerable people in the camps with high percentage of children, women and elderly who are living in a limited space in very poor hygiene conditions.

"Water borne diseases are extremely dangerous for children in this type of situation. We need to prevent that from happening," said Jean Lieby.

Unicef said it has identified 1,128 children who are separated from their families, and this number is expected to rise significantly in the coming days. For urgent support to these children, Unicef requires a fund of \$7.3 million. However, more is needed as the refugee population is growing, it said.

Meanwhile, the UN Population Fund said at least 13 percent of the Rohingya women fleeing violence in Myanmar are either pregnant or lactating mothers needing life-saving mater-

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SAID ABOUT PERSECUTION OF MYANMAR ROHINGYAS

nal and newborn health care services.

"Women do not stop getting pregnant or having babies just because an emergency hits," said Iori Kato, acting representative of UNFPA Bangladesh that works on reproductive health and gender development.

It sought emergency funding of \$13 million for reproductive health and gender-based violence response for Rohingya women and girls.

"Now, more than ever, we must be able to scale up our life-saving interventions to meet them," Iori Kato added.

US COMMISSION CONDEMNS Strongly condemning the attacks on civilians by Myanmar's security forces, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) called upon Aung San Suu Kyi to denounce the atrocities against Rohingyas.

"We call upon Burma's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi to unequivocally condemn the atrocities committed against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State", USCIRF Chairman Daniel Mark said in a statement on Monday.

The commission strongly urges Myanmar to collaborate with international partners like the UN and humanitarian organisations, as well as regional stakeholders including Bangladesh and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to ensure that Rohingya Muslims and other vulnerable populations immediately receive adequate resources and compassionate care.

# Death came hissing through the air

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But what she heard from her mother-in-law next, shattered her world once and for all: Both her sons had died.

"They killed my sons... I could not save my sons," said Taslima, 25, tears rolling down her cheeks.

The first bullet pierced through the arms of her younger son and then hit her shoulder, she said, pointing to her injuries.

Like her, 84 Rohingyas -- men, women and children of different ages -- are being treated at the Sadar hospital with bullet injuries and fractured bones.

The Daily Star spoke with four victims who are from the same Hasoprang village which was attacked on August 30, five days after the Myanmar military launched a crackdown on Rohingya villages following attacks by Rohingya insurgents on police and army camps early on August 25.

Describing the indiscriminate shooting on innocent civilians, Taslima said she lost five members of her family -- her two sons and her father-in-law, brother-in-law and sister-in-law -- in the attack.

"We could not even bury them. We had to flee for our lives, leaving them behind in the open field," said Taslima's husband Yunus, who reunited with her after the army left.

Wearing a lungi and an unusually large shirt that someone gave him at the hospital, he recounted what he saw while hiding in the hillock.

It was around 3:00pm. First, the troops encircled the entire Hasoprang village. Then they raided every house,



Taslima Begum along with her husband at the District Sadar Hospital in Cox's Bazar on Monday. Taslima is receiving treatment for gunshot wounds. The Rohingya couple's two sons were shot dead by Myanmar security forces in Rakhine State.

PHOTO: PINAKI ROY

looking for youths and able-bodied men. Forcing them out of their homes, the army set fire to the houses and shot at anyone trying to flee.

He could not give any number but said many died while many others were injured.

The family could not bring anything other than what they were wearing. The cash and the ornaments his wife managed to grab before fleeing were gone after the shooting. Yunus thinks the army men stole those before leaving the village.

"I had cows, goats and many sacks

full of rice in my house. We had to leave behind everything," he said.

Zamila Khatun, barely 15, was sitting on the bed next to Taslima's. She cannot lie down even when she wants to. The bullet that hit her chest came out through her back, just below her shoulder blade. Her grandmother, who is also Taslima's aunt, brought her to Cox's Bazar.

Zamila lost her father when she was a child and her mother married another man. So she was raised by her grandmother.

The two -- the grandchild and the

grandmother -- trekked through jungles and hills for four days before reaching Cox's Bazar.

Nasir Ahmed, from the same village, narrated the ordeal of carrying his bullet-hit son, Enayetullah, on his shoulder for one day and one night before he entered Bangladesh.

Mohammed Hossain, 75, is the oldest of this lot. He had witnessed persecution of Rohingya population by successive Myanmar regimes before.

"But I've never seen such atrocities in my life. They were shooting at will at people in the village, setting bombs [landmines] near the fence. They wanted to kill all the Rohingya Muslims."

A portion of his one leg was blown off as a landmine exploded while he was crossing the border. All the eleven other members of his family reached safely at the border near the Lambar Beel in Whykang.

"This time they sent the nastiest troops from Yangon. They are shooting people at first sight. People had no option but to flee to save their lives," said Hossain, a resident of Kumirkhali village of Maungdaw.

But it is not only his age that separates him from the rest of the group; he had been a refugee before. When the Myanmar army launched a crackdown on the Rohingya in 1978, some 3,00,000 fled to Bangladesh. He was one of them.

"But I don't like to live the life of a refugee. So after about a year in the Kutupalang camp, I went back to my village," he said.

His village, Kumirkhali, is just a two

hours' walk from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

"This time, they [troops] started torturing Muslims so severely. They prohibited prayers in local mosques around a year ago. They also shut down the local madrasa, Amirul Ulum Madrasa, three years ago. Later, they imposed restrictions on education of Muslim students one year ago," he said.

His grandson Rafiq Mia was a class five student at the time. He had to quit as the authorities were not allowing Muslim students in the school, he said.

They are not rich, but they do not have much of a problem supporting the family either. They have their own land to grow crops, raise cattle and poultry to raise and rice stock to sustain them throughout the year.

"We did not have any problem other than the army repression. I never wanted to come again as a refugee. My father and my grandfather lived and died there. They have their graves there. But we had no other way but to flee to save our lives," he said.

Shahen Abdur Rahman Chowdhury, resident medical officer of the hospital, said they were providing free treatment and medical supplies to the Rohingya people.

During surgeries, they found pellets, bullets and parts of metals, possibly from landmines, in the bodies of these patients, he said.

"The pressure was so high that we had to open a special orthopedic surgery unit only for the Rohingya patients," he said.

deteriorate for many Rohingyas who are seeking to flee Rakhine State in Burma and move into Bangladesh," Matthew Rycroft, UK permanent representative to the UN, told reporters on Monday.

On August 30, the Security Council discussed the situation behind closed doors. In a rare letter to the council earlier this month, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres voiced concern that the violence could spiral into a "humanitarian catastrophe."

Yesterday, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei came down hard on Myanmar's de facto leader and Nobel Laureate Suu Kyi, and said Myanmar's crackdown on Rohingyas marks the "death of the Nobel Peace Prize".

"A cruel government, at the top of which sits a cruel woman who was awarded a Nobel prize, kills innocent people, sets fire to them, destroys their houses and displaces them and no tangible reaction is seen," he said in a speech in Tehran.

UNHCR AIRLIFTING RELIEF The UNHCR has started flying in emergency relief materials for Rohingya refugees.

A chartered Boeing 777 yesterday morning brought 91 tonnes of aid materials from UNHCR's global stockpile in Dubai. In the afternoon, another flight carried aid donated to the UNHCR by the United Arab Emirates.

"The two emergency flights are meant to meet the immediate aid needs of some 25,000 refugees. Further flights are being planned, ultimately delivering emergency aid for some 120,000 refugees in total," said the UNHCR.

MORE RESOURCES NEEDED At a press briefing on Monday, UN secretary general's spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said that additional resources are needed as the scale and speed of the influx of people from Myanmar to Bangladesh overwhelmed the capacity on the ground.

"Aid agencies have prepared a preliminary response plan of \$77 million to deliver urgent, life-saving assistance to over 300,000 new arrivals," he said.

"There is no indication that the pace of these arrivals is slowing," Dujarric added.

## ROHINGYA CRISIS JS body for diplomatic move at UNGA

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A parliamentary body yesterday suggested that the foreign ministry launch a vigorous diplomatic initiative and raise prominently the Myanmar government's atrocities against Rohingyas in the upcoming UN General Assembly to get international support for a peaceful solution.

The parliamentary standing committee on foreign affairs came up with the suggestion in a meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban with Awami League lawmaker Dipu Moni in the chair.

In the meeting, foreign ministry officials told that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would deliver her speech at the UNGA on September 21, and they took necessary measures to raise the Rohingya issue there with due importance.

They also informed the parliamentary watchdog that the foreign ministry was going to hold "Bangladesh Envoys Conference" in November with the participation of all ambassadors and high commissioners of the country working abroad.

The three-day conference, first of its kind in the country, will start on November 7, meeting sources said.

Asked about the conference, ruling AL lawmaker Faruk Khan, who was present at the meeting, said apart from

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