

In the final week of August 2017 the pristine Ukhaia–Teknaf region of the southeast tip of Bangladesh, adjoining the Arakan state of Burma, had a rude awakening. The locals experienced an influx of refugees. Within weeks, parts of the long stretch of the Cox's Bazar–Teknaf road were bursting at the seams with the incoming Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children. They were pouring in “like the gush of a broken dam”, as one resident of Gundhum put it. Most of the uninvited guests were wandering around the area under the scorching summer sun or drenched in the pouring monsoon rain without any cover, not knowing what to do next—where to go, where to find water and food for their thirsty and starving children, a shed for a mother who just gave birth, and medical attention for an elderly who desperately needed it.

The residents of Teknaf–Ukhaia were faced with this unforeseen development at a time the state authorities based in Dhaka officially declared the Rohingyas as “infiltrators” and ordered the border guards to deport any “illegal Myanmar

nationals”. Reportedly, as a senior official of the security force was reiterating the directive to his subordinates, he was interrupted by the blare of helicopter gunships firing on Rohingyas just across the border.

Faced with the enormity of the refugee inflow and the burgeoning public opinion in favour of providing them asylum, both at home and abroad, the state authorities in Bangladesh had to come to terms with the futility of non-admission and push-back initiatives. They had little choice but to alter their course in dealing with the crisis. By then, tens of thousands of Rohingyas had fallen victim to unscrupulous fixers and boatmen, who extorted vast sums of money and other assets from the fleeing refugees to facilitate border crossing and find them safe passage. Press reports at the time inform that there was a 6,000 percent hike in river crossing tolls; refugees were paid 1/16th of the official rate of exchange rate while converting money and forced to sell gold at 1/8th of the prevailing market rate; and the fees to smuggle them to other parts of the country varied

# Voice of the host community

## *Lost in conversation*

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN



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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

between USD 1,200 to USD 6,200.

By the time the state authorities acknowledged the reality and decided to admit the Rohingyas, the Eid holidays set in, nearly paralysing the civil administration for days. Despite the best of intentions, it took several days, if not weeks, to shore up the official relief effort. In the mean time it was the ordinary folks of Ukhaia and Teknaf, of all creeds and classes, who shared their own meals; provided shelter in their homes, yards and land; allowed them to use their kitchens and toilets; helped them in nourishing their starving children and caring for the elderly; and patiently listened to the harrowing tales of losing loved ones that eased the pain of their uninvited guests.

In their effort to help the refugees, the locals were joined by hordes of fellow Bangladeshis, young and old, coming from even far-flung districts of Kurigram, Satkhira and Sylhet, and

mobilising resources of various types and volumes from their own families, schools, mosques and communities to ameliorate the sufferings of the refugees. Very soon they were joined by specialised agencies such as Ganoshastho Kendra, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Action Against hunger (ACF), Ad-Din, and Zakat Foundations and BRAC.

In order to provide space for building shelters to other incoming refugees, many local households endured severe losses as matured trees were felled in the land that were taken as lease from the government. Fields full of crop were damaged by spontaneous human movement. Fishing folks searching for fish fries were suddenly faced with a huge number of new competitors. With the sharp increase of new entrants in the local market desperately looking for work, the wage of local workers, including