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Systematic persecution, extreme poverty and alienation have led the Rohingya to seek asylum in other countries. A report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimates that 2,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshis died at sea between 2012 and 2015 (submitted to the Human Rights Council, 32nd session, June 28, 2016). While there are no reliable figures, there are reports that many of them are children.

On October 9, 2016, nine border guards were killed in three attacks in Myanmar's north-western border to Bangladesh. The President's Office held a previously unknown Rohingya group liable (see Human Rights Watch report, 2016). Soon after troops started to arrive in Maungdaw, a regional curfew was declared and 400 schools around the area were closed. While access is restricted in the Rakhine state, the following statements indicate the gravity of the situation. Pierre Peron, the spokesperson of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Myanmar estimated that over 30,000 people were displaced by the attacks (*Reuters*, November 18,

2016). In the UN Security Council, Washington's then ambassador Samantha Power expressed concern (*Reuters*, November 24, 2016).

Currently there are 146,500 internally displaced people in the Rakhine state. Mostly comprising Muslims, there are some Buddhists, and almost all the IDPs live in camps. More than 51 percent are girls and women, with more than 54 percent children (Shelter/NFI/CCCM cluster, Rakhine cluster analysis report, November 1, 2014, on file with IDMC). Following the renewed crackdown since last year, these camps have been severely affected. By mid-November 2016, more than 3,000 Buddhist Rakhines were displaced. In northern Rakhine, one fifth of children under the age of five suffer acute malnutrition (UNICEF factsheet).

Food and medical supplies in the camps provided by international organisations have either been restricted or completely stopped, contributing to the further vulnerability of children. Sexual abuse and lack of proper sanitation and medical supplies have affected sexual and reproductive health of girls and young women.

Widespread accusations of rape of Rohingya girls and women were either denied or shrugged off by the authorities. However, some of the responses to the accusations indicate how deeply the Rohingya are despised. For example, Aung Win, the chairman of the Rakhine investigation committee in his interview with the *BBC* last year laughed and stated that the soldiers would never rape Rohingya women because "they are very dirty". These responses and the most recent denials clearly show how the Rohingya, especially women and girls, can be quickly dismissed from any recourse to justice.

Children are also vulnerable when they are crossing treacherous borders to seek refuge. On August 25, 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya insurgent group—which, according to the International Crisis Group, was formed after the 2012 violence—attacked police posts and attempted to raid an army base in 25 locations (*International Crisis Group*, August 27, 2017). The disproportionate counter offensive carried out by the Tatmadaw forced the Rohingya population to flee across the border to Bangladesh.

As of September 30, an estimated 501,800 people have entered Bangladesh since the attacks, with more than 15,000 people coming in every day. People continue to come in through different crossing points, including by marine routes in coastal areas on the Bay of Bengal, over the Naf River in Teknaf and via land crossing points in Ukhia and Bandarban district.

Nearly half of the newly displaced are children. They narrated stories of violence that tell a tale of international crimes. UNICEF estimates that there are over 1,200 unaccompanied children who are at particular risk of human trafficking, sexual abuse, child labour and child marriage. There are 720,000 Rohingya children (both from previous and current displacement statistics) who remain vulnerable and require urgent attention. Over 45,000 children are malnourished.

About 60 percent of Rohingya girls were married before the age of 18. It is worth noting here that a UNHCR Report published in 2016 on mixed movements in Southeast Asia noted that one in every three women and girls said that they were victims of domestic violence.

The Leda camp is now sheltering 30,000 Rohingya. This camp occupies 25 acres in the hills near Teknaf. Since it started as a makeshift camp in 2007 and the population was not registered with the Bangladeshi government, children did not have access to public services including education, health and psycho-social support. While long term solutions are being considered, children in makeshift camps need immediate and

adequate access to services as well.

The recent wave of forced displacement also has broader regional implications. Leda is close to a Rakhine village where only 120 Rakhine families live. People in this village are worried that the inter-communal tension will spill over across the border and there is grave concern that the minority Buddhist community in Bangladesh will be targeted by extremists, where minorities and indigenous populations have been attacked and displaced numerous times under a range of pretexts. Some zealous local Bangladeshi Muslims have attacked indigenous Bangladeshi Buddhists including monks in different incidents. The Bangladesh Buddhist Federation has repeatedly condemned the ongoing repression (*The Daily Star*, November 27, 2016). Raja Devasish Roy, a widely respected leader of the community and the Chakma Circle Chief, issued statements urging the government to engage in bilateral and international diplomatic initiatives. Protesting the persecution of the Rohingya, the Buddhist community in Bangladesh canceled flying Fanush during Probarona Festival, the second largest religious festival of Buddhists on October 5. These are positive examples of the spirit of solidarity (*shouhardyo*) and compassion (*karuna*) that should be upheld and celebrated in Bangladesh and in Myanmar.

We need more civil society voices, particularly those from faith-based institutions who have the symbolic authority, to speak up and unite diverse opinions. It is really important to recognise and denounce hate speech. Myanmar needs to prioritise inter-communal dialogue in the Rakhine state. Access to humanitarian actors in the Rakhine state to provide services to children and their communities is crucial to save lives.

Every child has a right to live in dignity and has a right to childhood, they have a right to be protected from violence.

References

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