

Groups of Rohingya refugees sit clustered under the trees under the watchful eyes of the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB). Around them are their possessions. Here, they wait.

Minutes earlier, these new arrivals from Myanmar had walked up from the border in Maughpara, Teknaf. Men carried sacks on their heads. Women carried babies and young children, held the hands of older children and carried bags of their own.

They now wait to be transferred to the army distribution centre in Hariakhali, Sabrang. From there, they will be sent to any of now 20 camps situated throughout Teknaf and Ukha.

This is not a scene from earlier on this year. Four months since the influx started, refugees are still arriving in Bangladesh. While it is no longer the chaotic scenes witnessed in the border areas of Ghumdum and Shah Porir Dwip in August and September when thousands were massed at the border, these new arrivals are much smaller groups coming every few days, say BGB officials on the scene.

They had crossed the Naf by boat in the middle of the night. Landing on Bangladeshi soil, the refugees were escorted on this side of the border by the BGB. A majority of the new arrivals were children, who walked barefoot but were dressed warmly.

A group of young boys and men stand out among the families and large numbers of women and children. Sabbir Ahmed, 25, says that he and the others fled their village of Ulafe in Buthidaung as young men were in particular risk of being caught or killed by the military. 50 Rohingya from Sabbir's village were earlier detained by the military.

Such reports of violence in recent weeks continue though an agreement of return of the refugees was signed on November 23 by the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar. The deal calls for the repatriation process to be underway within two months.

Sabbir and the others from Ulafe each paid 35,000 kyat, roughly BDT 2100, for the boat ride to Bangladesh. He fled, fearing he would be apprehended too, leaving behind his wife and parents. When asked if his family were planning to come by the same route, Sabbir says, "It is difficult for women to come over the hills like we did. We also have to pay a lot to the boatmen to cross."

These refugees now amount to 655,000 at last count.

The violence, which the United Nations has called "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing", has killed at least 6,700 Rohingya, between August 25 and September 24, in the state of Rakhine according to surveys conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). August 25 marked the start of clearance operations allegedly against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) by Myanmar security forces.

Refugees continue to flee Rakhine out of fear of starvation and violence, albeit in fewer numbers compared to the unprecedented wave earlier.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

With refugees still streaming in, those in the camps say they don't want to go back

MALIHA KHAN

REFUGEE RIGHTS

Cox's Bazar: A changed landscape

Large stretches of areas off the Teknaf-Cox's Bazar highway have now been taken over by squalid makeshift settlements that have spilled over from existing camps.

With army distribution centres, UN warehouses and ICRC and MSF field hospitals visible off the main road, Cox's Bazar resembles a scene out of a film or pictures of refugee camps near a war zone. Aid organisations from the UN High Commission for Refugees to small, local NGOs have descended on the small town to provide basic needs to the Rohingya refugees.

Back in February of this year, I had visited several refugee camps including Kutupalong and Balukhali. These are now the largest two camps in Cox's Bazar, crammed with 547,000 older refugees and new arrivals. Now dubbed the Kutupalong-Balukhali Extension Site, it is the size of a small city with tents stretching as far as the eye can see.

Balukhali, as the name suggests, was little more than acres of recently deforested land where refugees fleeing the then violent crackdown by the army in northern Rakhine in October 2016 had started setting up shacks in the newly designated camp. Today, it is unrecognisable. It has now mushroomed into a densely populated camp with filthy lines of sewage meandering between the shacks.

With the army and government agencies coordinating services and NGO activities, the refugees are being registered and aid is being distributed more evenly than before in the camps and makeshift settlements. Aid agencies have risen to the challenge of providing their basic needs.

Life in the camps

Abdur Rahman and his family of seven, like thousands others, arrived in Bangladesh on September 2, Eid day last year. "We left our homes, our land and our people. But we are alive," said Abdur Rahman.

The camp where Rahman lives, Balukhali, is bustling with new arrivals gathering the assigned materials needed to build their shacks where space is still available. Even young children shoulder long bamboo poles to take to their designated space inside.

They have been allotted World Food Programme (WFP) ration cards which entitle them to 25 kg of rice, five kilograms of lentils, and two litres of oil every fortnight. Everything else has to be bought, but with little money to go around in the camps, refugees are mostly depending on an increasingly depressing combination of rice and lentils everyday.

Amir Hussein, 45, living in Jadimora camp in Teknaf

REFUGEE RIGHTS

echoes the views of many refugees when he says, "Every family, regardless of size, gets 50 kg of rice a month. A family consisting of one is getting the same amount as my family of 10 members."

In the preceding months, latrines and tube wells were being constructed by various NGOs to keep up with the pace of new arrivals in the camps. In Balukhali, an average of 115 refugees share a latrine, far beyond the UN guideline of 20 people per latrine. Latrines and tube wells located close together also pose health risks as water sources can be contaminated.

The situation now is vastly different compared to last year and earlier, when aid efforts in the camps were mostly underground. Aid workers were not allowed to speak freely to journalists and distribution was limited to UNHCR, WFP, Action Contra La Faim (ACF) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

Multiple child friendly spaces have been set up in the camps where children can experience a less chaotic environment than the grim surroundings of the camp. Inside one of nine such spaces in Balukhali, colourful drawings are hung up on the tent walls and Rohingya children sit on the floor drawing and playing with toys. The space hosts only an average of 40 children a day.

Children also attend learning centres and schools run by various NGOs in the camp, where they learn English and Burmese at the primary level. Almost 60 percent of Rohingya refugees are children. 21 percent are children under the age of five.

The large number of children and expecting mothers among the refugees has led to significant efforts to expand family planning programmes among other medical services provided in the camps. Sharifa, 23, a trained midwife from Rajshahi, works in a sexual and reproductive health service centre in Balukhali run by the HOPE Foundation.

"After extensive counselling, we are seeing progress with family planning methods being adopted by more and more Rohingya women." Working here since September, Sharifa has heard of several cases of rape suffered by refugees before their arrival here but young girls and women are reluctant to speak about these. There are also women friendly spaces in the camps.

Women refugees narrated stories of their life back in Burma and their arduous journey to Bangladesh. They

emphasise that coming here was not an easy decision.

Sobika, a mother of six, put it succinctly, saying, "We didn't leave behind our homes and land to come eat *chal* and *dal* here in Bangladesh. We came here to save our lives." They suffered for years but only came here now after it became too much, not anticipating that they would be provided food and shelter so generously here.

Left out in the open

Refugees tend to flock to the two largest camps, Kutupalong and Balukhali, where they say there is a greater chance of getting regular aid. But there is limited space and those who arrived more recently have to make temporary arrangements until they're allotted space in the camps, and end up in outlying areas.

Having arrived two months ago from Buthidaung, Nurul Salam and his family live in shacks on rented land just outside Jadimora camp. They pay BDT 400 a month for the space. "We have to pay money here but at least it's not overcrowded like in the camps," says Salam.

Sporadic aid and services reach these outlying areas. There are no schools in the area for the Rohingya children. Yet, just inside the nearby camp there are several schools and madrasas. Having only got army tokens, his household receives seven kilograms of rice every month. Salam claims that he gets the money for rent by selling off surplus relief items the household receives.

Such settlements are problematic, says Alaol Kabir, an official of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC) of Cox's Bazar. "These refugees will soon be relocated to the officially designated camps in order for services to be distributed uniformly and avoid problems with local communities."

Two rudimentary latrines have been constructed in the small settlement just the day before, two months on from when they arrived. They have been getting water from tube wells in the Jadimora area, but have recently

started facing backlash from locals.

Many refugees say that locals have been extremely supportive and not discriminated against them. Local hospitality is unsurprising considering the similarity in the language and religion of the refugees and locals' sympathy for the plight of the poor refugees fleeing hardship and violence.

Repatriation far off

While measures to ensure that the refugees' basic needs are being implemented, the camps are by no means ready to host such a large number in the long-term.

The Bangladesh government has been registering the refugees and intends for them to return to Myanmar. Over nine lakh Rohingya living in Ukha and Teknaf have been biometrically registered so far.

Going back, however, is not an option for most. "Even if we have to die here, we will. Still, we will not go back," says Sobika in Kutupalong.

While Myanmar has announced that it will begin repatriation of the Rohingya in accordance with the two-month deadline set out in the agreement, Bangladeshi government officials and aid agencies are less sure whether this is possible.

"It is difficult to forecast when the return of refugees takes place. The repatriation process is still in its preliminary stages; the joint working group has just been formed and is yet to meet," says Mohammad Abul Kalam, joint secretary of RRRRC of the disaster management and relief ministry.

Mohammed Abu Asaker, UNHCR spokesperson in Cox's Bazar, says that they are not yet aware of concrete measures taken for repatriation. "The situation in Rakhine is not conducive to safe return," he explains. UNHCR stresses that refugees have the right to return but only if "freely, safely and in dignity."

Another concern about the conditions in the agreement is that Myanmar insists on evidence of residency. Many Rohingya refugees like Amir Hussein have heard that repatriation is likely to begin sometime in January but don't have their papers with them.

In any case, many don't want to go back. Abdur Rahman in Balukhali echoed many others when he said that he and his family would only return if given back their lands, full citizenship and assured of their safety and basic rights. "It is still not safe back home; we prefer to live in the camps here than go back."



PHOTOS: SADAF SAAZ