

Camp or prison?

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Many of their houses and villages were burnt and bulldozed by the security forces. The Myanmar government has been constructing new camps. Many Rohingyas, once repatriated, will be kept in those camps as they have lost their homes.

However, the inhuman condition of those in the Sittwe camps seems to have terrorised the Rohingyas who have taken shelter in the camps in Cox's Bazar.

Therefore, they want the visiting delegation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to put pressure on Myanmar so that it shuts down all the camps in Sittwe and does not build new ones for confining more Rohingyas after repatriation.

The closure of the camps is one of the 13-point demands the Rohingyas are set to put forward to the UNSC team as it visits the camps in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia today.

The Daily Star correspondents, reporting from the upazila, have obtained a copy of the paper having the demands written on it.

The Rohingyas also want the UNSC to take measures for sending peacekeepers to Rakhine so that they can keep the refugees safe following their repatriation.

The hope for returning to home flickered in the minds of the Rohingyas languishing in the Sittwe camps after Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Advisory Commission had recommended closing the IDP camps and allowing freedom of movement there.

But a day after the former UN secretary general submitted its report to the Myanmar government, the security forces there launched the crackdown in August.

One lakh Rohingyas languishing in the camps again became a forgotten chapter. They will have to stay in those camps for an indefinite period. The Rohingyas who crossed over into Bangladesh are in the focus now.

This time around, Myanmar is building camps in Hla Po Khaung in northern Rakhine to temporarily accommodate 30,000 Rohingyas after their repatriation from Bangladesh, according to a report by state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar.

Aung Tun Thet, chief coordinator of Myanmar's Union Enterprises for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development, told Reuters in January that the camp in Hla Po Khaung would be a "transition place" for Rohingya refugees before they are repatriated to their "place of origin" or the nearest settlement to their place of origin.

But the Rohingyas, sheltered in Bangladesh cannot keep faith in the assurance from the Myanmar government. The tale of those rotting in the camps in Sittwe says it is indeed difficult to have faith in that.

The Rohingyas in Bangladesh fear they may end up having the same fate.

THE SITTWE CAMPS

On numerous occasions, the international media and human rights organisations have highlighted the inhuman living conditions in the Sittwe camps.

About the situation there, Time magazine on March 13, last year in a report said most days in the camps are far less joyous. The frequency of illness is hardly surprising; medical care is scarce and sanitary conditions are abysmal. Unclothed kids play in a stream of dirty water close to the camp's latrines, human waste scattered on the ground nearby.

Fortify Rights, a rights organisation based in Southeast Asia, in its report in 2014 said the Myanmar government has obligations under international laws to ensure that all displaced Rohingyas have liberty of movement to improve their livelihoods. But the government has failed to meet these obligations by restricting the freedom of movement of displaced Rohingyas.

It said the UN and several embassies in Myanmar have described the humanitarian conditions endured by the internally displaced Rohingyas as among the world's worst and pronounced the situation as "dire."

The situation in those camps keeps worsening. A Sittwe Camp Profiling Report released in June 2017 said those temporary shelters became increasingly congested and the condition of the shelters deteriorated significantly since the camps were established.

Funded by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and UNHCR, the report said three potential solutions to internal displacement are to return to the place of origin, to integrate into the local areas where people initially sought refuge, or to resettle in another location.

The Myanmar government, however, all along remains nonchalant.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Rohingya refugees receive bamboos from the UNHCR at Balukhali Rohingya camp in Ukhia upazila of Cox's Bazar. Inset, the bamboo bridge between the no-man's land and Bangladesh's Tombru. The bridge was made in the last couple of days for the Rohingyas in the no-man's land so that they can join a meeting with the visiting UNSC delegates in Tombru. The pictures were taken yesterday.



Promises Myanmar never kept

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Then came the military crackdowns in 2012 and 2016 following ethnic conflicts, making life more difficult.

"I could not stay anymore when my house was burnt like those of many others. We fled to Bangladesh to save our lives," Nurul, father of five children, told The Daily Star, sitting along a road in Kutupalong Friday.

The mega camp in Kutupalong became the world's largest refugee camp in recent times after some 700,000 Rohingyas fled the latest military offensive in August last year.

In the earlier waves in 1978 and 1991-92, hundreds of thousands of this persecuted minority community fled, but most of them returned home in the hope of better days. However, many of them had to flee to Bangladesh again and again.

In all, more than 1.1 million Rohingyas now live in Bangladesh.

Their life and living condition in Myanmar is reflected in the 13-point demand they prepared for their repatriation as the UNSC visits the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.

The demands include closing the camps for internally displaced people (IDP); ensure presence of international security forces in Rakhine for safety; and restoration of citizenship for the Rohingya people.

Myanmar signed a repatriation deal with Bangladesh amid global pressure in November last year, but the repatriation is yet to begin.

The UN and other rights bodies say the situation in Rakhine is still "extremely concerning" and is not conducive for the safe and dignified return of the Rohingya.

Nurul Amin does not like the refugee life in the squalid camp and wants to return to Maundaw, but he cannot trust Myanmar anymore. The Myanmar authorities say Rohingya have to first apply for the NVC, which is a gateway to citizenship."

He admitted in the past it was not easy for those having NVCs to move freely. The refugees say the small number of Rohingyas

DEMANDS OF ROHINGYAS

- 1. Close IDP camps in Sittwe and other parts of Arakan
- 2. No new IDP camp in Northern Arakan
- 3. International security presence in Arakan
- 4. Restoration of citizenship under the ethnicity of Rohingya
- 5. End the National Verification Card system
- 6. Involvement of UNHCR in the repatriation process
- 7. Right of Rohingya to return to their homes
- 8. Return confiscated land and compensate losses
- 9. Allow international media, rights groups and humanitarian workers in Arakan
- 10. Release all innocent Rohingya and stop false accusations
- 11. Allow Rohingya government staff to continue with their service
- 12. Allow freedom of religion, education, health, movement and access to business
- 13. Hold those who committed abuses and crimes against the Rohingya accountable

Aung Tun Thet, chief coordinator of Myanmar's Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine, said, "If you go through it [NVC], you are sure of citizenship."

He admitted in the past it was not easy for those having NVCs to move freely. The refugees say the small number of Rohingyas

During a recent visit to Bangladesh, Dr

who took NVCs in exchange for money could move within a neighbourhood. To move from one locality to another, they have to pay much higher.

Tun Thet said, "Now, with NVCs, people [Rohingya] can move freely within their own township in Rakhine. Slowly as you build trust, then you would be eligible to have National Registration Card."

Myanmar's social welfare minister U Win Myat Aye, after a visit to Cox's Bazar early April, said that the Rohingyas were ill-informed about the NVC.

At a press conference in Yangon, upon return from Bangladesh, he stressed that NVC holders were eligible for citizenship after five months.

Nurul, however, said Myanmar did not keep its promise of granting citizenship in the past.

"How can we trust Myanmar government?" he said, reflecting the frustration of any Rohingya men and women in the camps in Cox's Bazar.

Syed Alam, 20, said he wants to go back to his motherland as soon as possible as a Rohingya, not as an illegal migrant from Bangladesh.

Alam, who studied up to class 10, the highest level of education any Rohingya can obtain in Rakhine, said the Myanmar authorities were deceiving the Rohingya in the name of repatriation.

"Having NVC means we are illegal migrants from Bangladesh. It is a tragedy that we will be treated as illegal migrants in our motherland. If one takes the card, he has to stay in the camp for the rest of his life," he added.

Abdul Kader, 60, another Rohingya, said the lives of those who took embassy cards in Rakhine were simply ruined.

"They never got citizenship cards. They also could not own property worth more than TK 30,000. So you understand the scenario," he told this correspondent, sitting at a shop at a crowded Rohingya market in Kutupalong.

The Rohingya cannot even rear any

chicken, cow or goat without permission of the military, he claimed.

"They [army] visit once a month. If they find any increase in number of domestic animals, the Rohingya have to pay for that. Even if anyone wants to marry, they have to pay. Relatives also have to pay to the military to bury their dead," he claimed.

"If the Myanmar government gives us citizenship card, we will return to Myanmar immediately," said Mohammad Yusuf, who fled to Bangladesh along with his five sons and four daughters on October 9 from Akyab in Rakhine where he owns 3.5 acres of land.

"Having an 'embassy card' means you are a Bangladeshi and entered Myanmar illegally. Why should we take that card? Are we Bangalees? If we take NVC cards, we will never be given citizenship. We will have to return again," Yusuf said.

Noor Mohammad, a Rohingya in Kutupalong, said the Myanmar authorities offered him NVC card for the last 15 years, but he refused. He said Hindus and Buddhists, who crossed the border to Myanmar, got the nationality cards immediately, but not the Rohingya Muslims.

"If they can get nationality cards, why shouldn't we? Why should we be foreigners in our motherland?"

Razia Sultan, a Rohingya lawyer and activist, said the Rohingya were denied government jobs, higher education, healthcare and freedom of movement since 1982.

"We live like illegal foreigners in a land where we lived for generations. This is unbelievable but true," said Razia, who fled to Bangladesh in the 1980s with her parents.

She said the Rohingya want Myanmar to recognise them as an ethnic group of Myanmar and as citizens with all basic rights.

The lack of a UN Security Council resolution has left the Myanmar government convinced that it has literally gotten away with mass murder," he said and also called for targeted sanctions on perpetrators and an arms embargo.

Shield Rohingyas

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in the district, said in the statement. "We need to be able to act now if lives are to be saved."

Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General Stéphane Dujarric updated the situation in Cox's Bazar as the Security Council members are making their visit. "As you know, the overall population of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is currently estimated to be over 1 million. New refugees are still arriving, with some 8,000 new arrivals since January 2018," he said in a press conference in New York on Friday.

Stéphane said the joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, launched in mid-March, is only 9 per cent funded till date. It requests \$951 million until December 2018 to help respond to the needs of some 1.3 million people, including both Rohingya refugees and vulnerable members of the host community.

Of that, the \$182 million allocated to provide Cox's Bazar with assistance through December is facing a shortfall of almost \$151 million.

The IOM's statement said without aid numerous refugees in Cox's Bazar would have to remain in these hazardous locations and hundreds of thousands of others would also be at risk if roads become impassable, blocking access to aid supplies and medical services.

Of some one million Rohingya refugees currently living under tarpaulins, on steep, sandy slopes denuded of vegetation, at least 120,000 have been identified as being at high risk due to floods and landslides triggered by heavy rain.

"Of these, 25,000 have been identified as being at highest risk from landslides. But without aid, many will have to remain in their current hazardous locations," the statement said.

"Tarp stocks are also rapidly running out and the IOM, which oversees shelter distribution, reports that by mid-May supplies will fall below critical levels," McCue said and added that without more funding, new shelters or replacements would not be available to those who lost homes during storms.

He also pointed out that other risks include safe water supply systems, which, if collapsed, could put hundreds of thousands of refugees at risk of waterborne diseases.

Aid workers on the ground are working to improve shelters, secure key access roads and have emergency response services ready should the worst happen, "but the harsh truth is that we cannot keep doing that if we do not have the funds," McCue said.

Meanwhile, the Human Rights Watch (HRW), ahead of the UN Security Council delegation's visit to Myanmar from Monday, called for the Rohingya crisis to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Kenneth Roth, executive director of HRW, told reporters in Yangon on Friday that the Security Council should issue a resolution to refer Myanmar to the ICC or else no one will be held accountable.

The lack of a UN Security Council resolution has left the Myanmar government convinced that it has literally gotten away with mass murder," he said and also called for targeted sanctions on perpetrators and an arms embargo.

The visiting UN officials are: Claudia Angela Banz of Switzerland, Nesrin Said Amin Hannoun of Jordan, Ahmed Mohamed Abdel Wahab RHB Feshaw of Egypt, Nabi Shafik Awad of the USA, Miranda Camille Lucy Moses of Trinidad and Tobago, Iqro Anson Gill of Barbados, Jung Hwan Lee of the USA, David Michael Kinna of the UK, Luis Amadeo Solari Antonia of Peru, and Kuwait counsellor SSS Alfassam Talal.

Roxburgh, PR of the UK.

Other member of the delegation are: Sacha Sergio Llorente Soliz, PR of Bolivia; Anatollo Ndong Mba, PR of Equatorial Guinea; Takeda Alemu, PR of Ethiopia; Kairat Umarov, PR of Kazakhstan; Mansour Ayyad Al-Otaib, PR of Kuwait; Lise Huberta Johanna Van Haaren, DPR of Netherlands; Gustavo Adolfo Meza Cuadra Velasquez, PR of Peru; Joanna Wronecka, PR of Poland; Bjorn Olof Skoog, PR of Sweden.

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had to still continue mounting the pressure.

He suggested Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visit China, India and Russia immediately to communicate the gravity of the tragedy and the need for a sustainable solution.

Bangladesh missions abroad should hold programmes, including conferences and photo exhibitions, to highlight the depth of the Rohingya crisis and create a stronger global opinion on the matter, he said.

Keep pressure on Myanmar to expedite repatriation

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secretary Khurshid Alam, started around 7:00pm and went on for over two hours. In the beginning, on behalf of Bangladesh's Armed Forces Division Brig Gen Monirul Islam Akhand, Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) Abul Kalam, and Director General (South Southeast Asia) Tareq Muhammad of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made three presentations.

The presentations highlighted Rohingya people's history in Myanmar, how they have been persecuted and what measures Bangladesh government has taken to handle the situation and the repatriation process.

The delegation assured Bangladesh authorities that they would urge the global community to recognise the problem as a severe one and to come forward to help resolve the problem through various means, including financial assistance.

The visiting delegates wanted to know

about important people and sources in Myanmar, who can provide them with the true picture in the Rakhine State during their visit to Myanmar.

The delegation expressed concerns over the upcoming monsoon season and wanted to know the government's plan to avert any disasters.

Bangladesh presented the plans in details and assured the delegation that preparations had been made.

The delegation said the repatriation process was a complex and lengthy one.

Documents, important write-ups on the Rohingya issue, a book on Rohingya history and the government's plan on Rohingya relocation in Bhasanchar were handed over to each member of the delegation.

The delegates agreed on most issues discussed, the sources said.

The delegation arrived in Cox's Bazar for a firsthand look at the plight of over 700,000 Rohingyas who fled Myanmar

since August 25 last year amid a military crackdown.

Envoy of the permanent UNSC members and non-permanent members reached Cox's Bazar around 4:00pm.

Acting foreign secretary Khurshid Alam, accompanied by other government officials received the delegation at Cox's Bazar airport.

Later in the afternoon, Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Abul Kalam and Cox's Bazar Deputy Commissioner Kamal Hossain talked with the delegation about the repetition process and the government initiatives on providing humanitarian assistance to the persecuted Rohingyas.

Shahriar Alam, state minister for foreign ministry, told The Daily Star that he was hoping the visit would help Bangladesh garner international community's support