

A year ago, when tens of thousands of destitute Rohingya, fleeing systematic violence in Rakhine State, had arrived at the outskirts of the small tourist town of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, locals had opened up their hearts and their homes to their "Muslim brothers and sisters" from neighbouring Myanmar. They had sympathised upon hearing the dreadful stories of murder, rape and pillage of Muslim-majority Rohingya at the hands of the Myanmar army; they had shared their food and homestead land with the refugees—even before policymakers in Dhaka had decided that Bangladesh would host the persecuted community from Myanmar on "humanitarian grounds".

A year later, however, resentment runs high amongst the host community. Many blame the Rohingya for robbing them of their agricultural land, and stealing their jobs; they complain of the price hikes—particularly since the influx of national and international NGOs working in the camps—that have made it impossible, especially for poor families, to hold on to their previous standard of living. "For how long?" is the question asked most frequently by locals when reminded that the Rohingya have nowhere else to go. "For how long are we to put our lives on hold, and sacrifice our livelihoods for them?"

Sixty-year-old Minowara Begum, who lives on the outskirts of Kutupalong-Balukhali camp, remembers life before the influx. "We have lived on this land for as long as I can remember, since my marriage 40 years ago, and grown produce in fertile agricultural land here. It wasn't much, but it was a comfortable life. When the Rohingya first



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

# STRUGGLING TO BE GRACIOUS HOSTS

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

arrived, my heart bled for them. I told my husband, why not give them some space in our backyard, the Almighty would bless us for our kindness. But now, nothing's left anymore—all the land is gone, so are our means of living. We now have to depend on our son-in-laws' charity for making ends meet. Now I think to myself, is this how Allah rewards us?"

Even prior to the influx, Cox's Bazar was

identified as a "lagging district" of Bangladesh, with Ukhia and Teknaf among the most socially deprived upazilas (BSS, 2017), with 33 percent people living below the poverty line and 17 percent below the extreme poverty line. The two upazilas are home to about 500,000 inhabitants—and more than a million refugees, including those from previous influxes of 1978 and 1991-92.

For the poor and extreme poor in the already impoverished upazilas, the recent Rohingya influx has undoubtedly intensified the struggle over scarce resources.

Md Mostaq Mia, a landless farmer, used to grow rice, potatoes, and other produce on land

leased from his neighbours; during the off season, he would work as a day labourer to supplement his income and support his family of six.

"Now, I can no longer grow anything. The lands have either been taken up by the Rohingya or leased to NGOs for their offices and other activities. The NGOs pay three or four

times the amount of what I used to pay to lease the land. How can I compete with that?" he asks.

Mostaq says that his wages as day labourer have also gone down in the past year—from Tk 500 to Tk 300-350. "In the beginning, the NGOs would hire locals to work in the camps, but now they only hire the Rohingya. Meanwhile,



32-year-old Rokeya Khatun comments, "We have to find a way to live side by side."

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN