



Minowara Begum talks about how her family has lost their agricultural land and livelihood options since the influx.

PHOTOS: ANISUR RAHMAN

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 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 Ukhiya 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, the refugees have flooded the market with their cheap labour and we can no longer compete with them," he complains.

With vast areas of agricultural land and forests cleared to make way for camps, villagers dependent on agriculture and forest-based activities are desperately looking for alternative livelihood opportunities—without much luck.

The fishermen, too, have been hit hard by the influx. "I used to earn as much as Tk 1000 a day fishing in the Naf River, but now there are severe restrictions on fishing there.

The Border Guards snatch our fishing nets and there's the risk of being shot to death from guards on the other side if we venture too far," says Abdus Samad, who, like other fisherfolk, now have to work as casual labourers, further depressing wages in an already oversaturated market. "The Rohingya at least get free food and other facilities in the camps, what do we get?" he asks.

Many locals from impoverished households echo Samad's bitterness that the refugees are being provided relief goods and other services, while they are struggling to feed their families. "Are we not poor as well? Are our lives much better than the Rohingya living in the camps, where hundreds of NGOs are working to make their lives better?" asks Samad's neighbour, Wali Ullah. "Now that the Rohingya are here, no one cares about us anymore."

Meanwhile, prices have increased exponentially in the past one year. According to an assessment by Save the Children, BRAC, World Vision, WFP, and UNHCR published this year, the cost of the average food basket has increased by 18 percent, schooling by 18 percent, non-food items by 10 percent, transportation by 34 percent, and medical expenses by 25 percent. Overall expenditure has increased by 27.68 percent in the host community, compared to 4.65 percent in control areas. As a result, seven out of 10 households have had to change their consumption patterns, including food habits. The assessment further highlights growing food insecurity in the host

community—approximately 34 percent of households have a poor food diversity score, 56 percent of households are borderline and only 10 percent of households have an acceptable score. With neighbouring forests destroyed, scarcity of firewood has also increased the economic burden on households.

Unable to meet the rising costs, many families are now withdrawing children from school. According to a situation analysis of the host community by Care Bangladesh, transportation time to and from schools have increased by three-four times, which has had an adverse impact on attendance, especially for female students who also reported increased harassment on the roads. Boys are dropping out of school to work as volunteers or drivers or the start small shops. Furthermore, many school teachers are now working in the camps, at three times the pay, which has left a void in local schools. A college-going student, who now works as a fixer and translator for NGOs and journalists, say, "Local college students are hardly showing up for classes. They work for the NGOs and bring home money so their parents also voice no objection to them skipping classes."

Rising inequality, poverty, and inflation in the region are fuelling tensions between the host and refugee communities—and in the absence of a concrete repatriation plan a year on, sympathy for the Rohingya are slowly dwindling among the locals. The resentment of the host community, if not addressed on an urgent basis, can manifest itself in dangerous ways.

The good news is that both the government and NGOs working closely with the Rohingya have identified the growing anxieties of the locals, particularly the negative impact on poorer communities, as a major cause of concern.

Shamimul Huq Pavel, in-charge of site management of five camps in Kutupalong, from the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC), says, "When the Rohingya outnumber the local population almost by double, there is naturally a social disequilibrium, which can cause unnecessary tension between the two communities. Besides, this district was riddled with poverty even before the influx began; the situation has only worsened over the years. The government has strengthened its social safety net three to four times to give support to vulnerable populations."

Fiona MacGregor, International Organization for Migration (IOM) spokesperson in Cox's Bazar, also recognises the need to support host communities and institutions in coping with the impact of the influx. "IOM and other UN agencies are clear that this response must

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