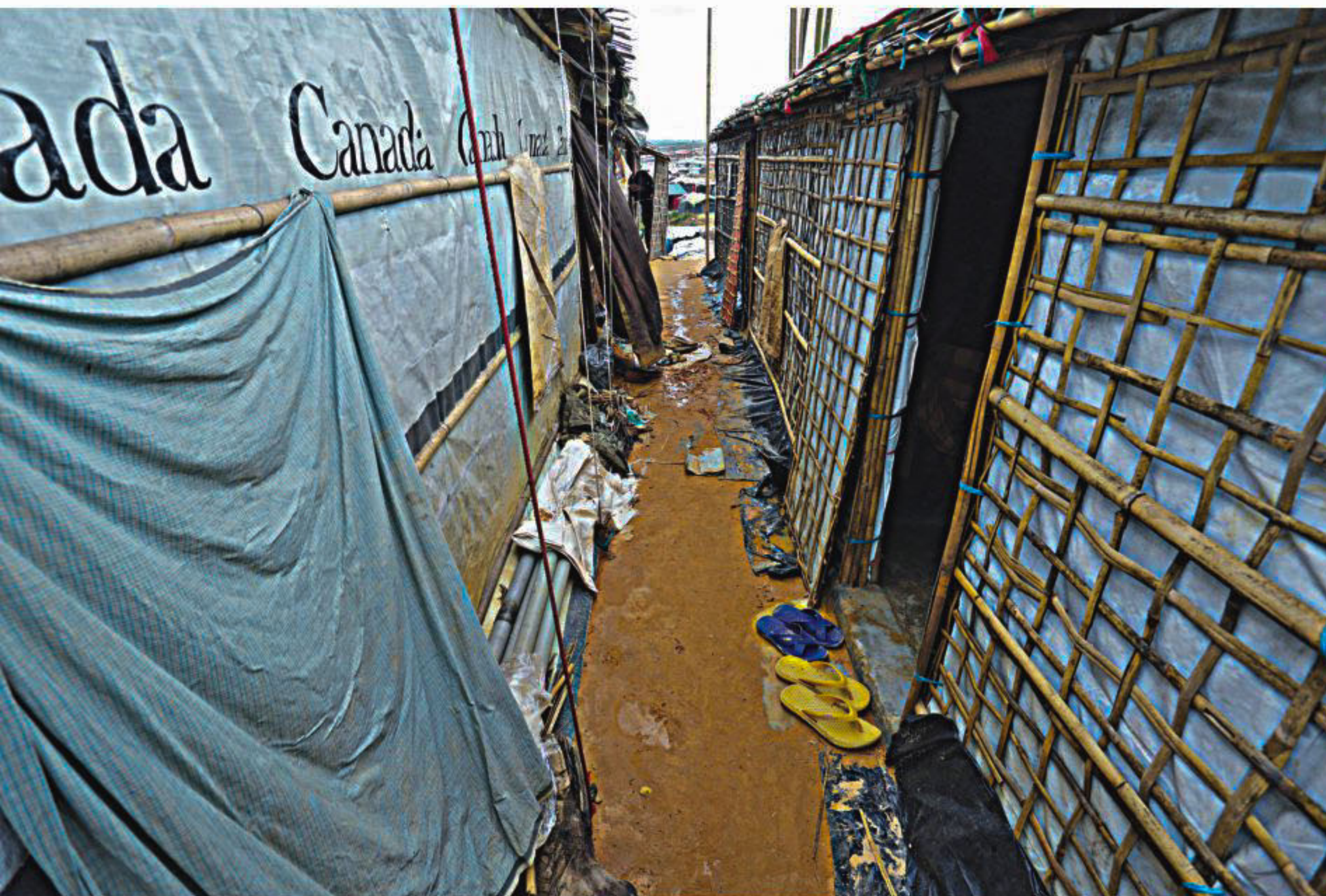


We stand in the middle of Rohingya Camp No. 18. It is in the southwest of Kutupalong Rohingya camp cluster in Ukhia upazila of Cox's Bazar district. We are stunned. What used to be green hills months ago are completely devoid of vegetation today and covered with tens of thousands of flimsy shelters made of bamboo, polythene, and tarpaulin of different

colours. There is hardly any empty space in the hills occupied by the Rohingya. Every inch is now occupied by humans. During the daytime, a low clamour can be heard everywhere and the Muslim call for prayer ring out from the mics of the mosques at intervals.

On May 19 this year, when we stood in the completely ruined forest landscape, we stopped Giasuddin, a young man from Balukhali (a village



Shelters in a camp made of bamboo, polythene and tarpaulin.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

east of Camp No. 18) to hear how he as a local felt about the abrupt change in his neighbourhood.

"The entire area was jungle with acacia plantation. This is elephant territory," says Giasuddin with confidence. "I have seen tigers, elephants, and other animals in this area. The jungle

The destruction of the forest is not just about clearing of trees. The number of plant species and wildlife in and around the camp sites are in danger of being drastically reduced, if not completely wiped out.

was there until Rohingya poured in."

Monjur Alam, a 31-year-old-Rohingya of Balukhali camp, agrees with Giasuddin. "When we came here nine months ago, it was all good jungle. I myself cut 10 to 12 trees to make space for my house. I saw an elephant the day I came here. The elephant killed two persons of a family," says Alam. "We used to go to the jungle to collect firewood. But when the rain started, we stopped going there out of fear of elephants and leeches."

When the Rohingya, in the face of genocide in their own country, had begun to come into



PHOTOS: PHILIP GAIN

Hills in Balukhali camp area being cut for construction of road shows vividly the soil condition in the area.



Kitchen of a Rohingya family that has bottle LNG.

Bangladesh from August 25, 2017 onwards, everybody was shocked. The Rohingya influx, with nearly 120,000 people crossing the border per week at its peak, was the highest since the Rwandan genocide (according to an estimate by *The Economist*).

The land where the Rohingya camps were built was covered with greenery and was under the jurisdiction of Bangladesh Forest Department (FD). The FD officials tried to prevent the Rohingya from occupying the forestland. They did not anticipate then, the sheer number of people that were yet to come. "We were in the field for little over a week since August 25 to resist. But the Rohingya influx since Eid-day (September 5, 2017) was so great that we gave up. We had no time for planning. Our main purpose was to protect people," says Md. Ali Kabir, the Divisional Forest Officer of Cox's Bazar South Forest Division.

Environmental degradation continues

The initial days of the Rohingya influx were traumatic for the Forest Department and they watched helplessly as the Rohingya people settled in the forest land in Cox's Bazar.

What is unique about the district of Cox's Bazar is that officially 38 percent of its land surface is forestland and in the upazila of Ukha alone, it is more than 50 percent. According to the office of the Cox's Bazar South Forest Division, the state of the