

The de-sludgers of Chakmapur



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Teams of workers go through Chakmapur camp daily emptying toilets and carrying the waste to a filtering plant.

Chakmapur camp: “It’s a tough job, but because of us, people no longer have to run into the jungle to go to the toilet,” says 35-year-old Hamid Hasina. He and his Rohingya refugee colleagues are taking a break from an unpleasant but critical job – emptying dozens of toilets in Chakmapur camp.

Hamid and his team of seven toilet de-sludgers (as they are known) move through the camp daily from seven in the morning, going from toilet to toilet.

“It’s a smelly job but after a while you get used to it,” says Hamid, adjusting his face mask.

Each member of the team is jointly employed by UNICEF and the Bangladesh army and receives about \$10 a day. They empty up to 10 latrines on an average day by pouring the waste from the toilets into a container which two men carry using bamboo poles to a processing plant outside the camp. It is an arduous uphill walk in intense heat.

The work is relatively well paid – but few de-sludgers do it for longer than six months.

“With my wages, I am able to buy chicken, fish and vegetables for my family,” says Hamid. “But I would only like to do this job for two more months.”

The processing plant manager is Jashim Uddin, a Bangladeshi who works for UNICEF partner Solidarites International. He explains that the plant filters about 500 litres of water extracted from the toilet waste over a 24-hour period.

“It’s perfectly clean water by the time it has been filtered,” Uddin says, adding that regular tests are carried out to check its purity.

The processing plant is being expanded at the same time as an extensive toilet rebuilding scheme – funded by UNICEF and implemented by the Bangladeshi army – is proceeding.

The new toilets come with a cement base to stop them from being flooded during heavy monsoon rainfall. Rohingya carpenter Mohammed Wasiullah, 35, is making the framework for 80 of them.

Wasiullah says he is proud of his work but disappointed that many refugees do not use the toilets properly. “If people do not clean them after going to the toilet they can fall into a state of disrepair very quickly,” he says.