ROHINGYA GENOCIDE REMEMBRANCE DAY

# Three years on: what's next for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh?



25, 2017, headlines across the world were dominated by the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh. This continued for almost a month after Myanmar

security forces launched a deadly crackdown, or "clearance operation", targeting the minority population from Rakhine state. A 444-page report prepared by the UN's **Independent Facts Finding Commission** confirmed that more than 725,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, at least 10,000 Rohingya were killed, hundreds of women and girls were raped (mostly gang-raped), and around 392 Rohingya villages were partially or fully

Since then, Bangladesh has become home to 1.1 million Rohingya refugees, including those who have fled previous bouts of violence as well as new arrivals. Kutupalong refugee camp, which covers an area of 13 kilometres, has become the largest refugee camp in the world for hosting 700,000 Rohingya refugees in a single camp. Today marks the third anniversary of the Rohingya influx in Bangladesh, but the solution to the Rohingya crisis has not been found yet.

The Rohingya community living in Bangladesh are frequently portrayed in two ways—national and international human rights bodies focus on their everyday struggle for food and water supply, sanitation, healthcare, housing, education, cooking materials, childcare, maternity support and

daily essentials; whilst the host community often criticise the easy access of refugees to support from national and international aid agencies. There are also increasing concerns regarding the growing degradation of the local ecology, rapid deforestation from using firewood, mounting illegal border trade, encroaching of grassland for livestock rearing and more. These issues are gradually eroding the space of coexistence between the host community and refugees.

Besides, growing tensions in connection with inter-group and intra-group conflicts as well as militant activities in the refugee camps, mounting cases of trafficking, and worries of reduced aid due to decreasing international support, are increasing the mistrust between the Rohingya and the host community, which is some cause for concern.

During the last three years, two repatriation attempts were made. The first one was on November 15, 2018, and the second one was in August 2019, but they failed mainly due to three reasons. Firstly, Myanmar's continued reluctance and unwillingness to bring the Rohingya back. There were no convincing and tangible preparations taken by Myanmar in accordance with the "Arrangement on the return of displaced person from Rakhine State" signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar in January 2018.

Secondly, the international community did not support the repatriation attempts, which they termed as a premature move, because Rakhine's situation remained unchanged and thereby, unsafe for the Rohingyas. Thirdly, the Rohingya refugees declined to return voluntarily because Myanmar had failed to give any reliable promise or consistent commitment to the Rohingya to



Rohingya refugees walk after crossing the Naf river from Myanmar into Bangladesh in Whaikhyang.

PHOTO:
AFP/FRED DUFOUR

guarantee their rights as citizens of Myanmar. Afterwards, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic affected the camps and halted all repatriation

As a result, the fate of repatriation is hanging in the balance, and the future of the Rohingya is becoming increasingly uncertain. It is clear that Myanmar is in no hurry to resolve the Rohingya crisis, with no concrete steps mapped out to address or redress injustices in their country. On the other hand, Bangladesh seems increasingly more reluctant

to host such a massive refugee population on its territory. Three years have passed, but there is no light at the end of the tunnel for the persecuted Rohingya population.

Perhaps mounting pressure from the international community and international rights bodies, media portrayal of Rohingya vulnerabilities and continued efforts from Bangladesh might compel Myanmar to initiate the repatriation process for the third time, but it would certainly fail again because there are no dependable promises

or tangible preparations from the Myanmar end that would give the Rohingya enough trust to return to their homeland voluntarily. However, based on previous experiences and the unexpected present situation, we can assume that Bangladesh will not willingly host 1.1 million Rohingya any more or give them space for social integration at any cost, and the option of third country resettlement has also been stopped because of the

Considering these multifaceted dilemmas, the Rohingya people are leading their lives in extreme uncertainty. We can see no bright light of hope except their struggling present and an uncertain future. Although the Rohingya eagerly await a safe and dignified return to their homeland, they find little hopes in the given context of the Rohingya

The question now is: what needs to be done for the future of the Rohingya people? We strongly expect, with a renewed appeal, that the international community should uphold the idea of "burden-sharing" to help the Rohingya in refugee camps and make their lives more "liveable" in Bangladesh. There should also be efforts to form a "collective and global force" to compel Myanmar to comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 to bring the Rohingya living in Bangladesh back to Myanmar with safety, dignity and legal recognition by conferring citizenship on them.

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## What role do nature-based solutions play in the Rohingya refugee crisis?



three years, the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and Teknaf have been telling us many stories of failures, successes and

These camps are a painful symbol of Myanmar's atrocities

against its own citizens, making them stateless. The government of Bangladesh, the United Nations (UN) agencies and their partners, and numerous donors, however, have managed to offer these 1.1 million people shelter, food, water, sanitation facilities, health services, protection from violence and trafficking, as well as education, energy supply, and safety from natural hazards. However, these 34 refugee camps still remain a failed story of humanity, full of uncertainties around return of the Rohingyas, including their 438,000 children, to Myanmar.

The Rohingya refugee crisis not only hurts our dignity as humans, it has also made a deep scar on Bangladesh's efforts towards environmental conservation. According to a report by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of Bangladesh, as of early October last year, the overall ecological damage of this refugee crisis cost about USD 285 million. Almost 60 percent of this damage was due to the loss of biodiversity. Other losses include destruction of natural and planted trees as well as uprooting of trees. That report also noted that the refugee settlements occupy about 2,500 hectares of forest land, while another 750 hectares of forest were destroyed from firewood collection by the refugees.

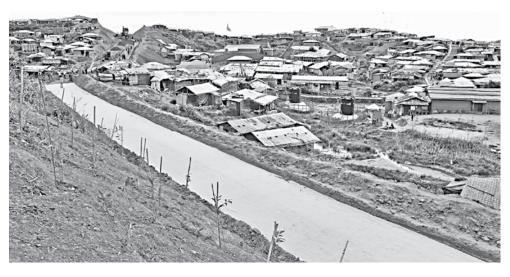
Despite this worrying situation, the government and UN agencies have taken some commendable actions to improve the overall environment in the refugee camp areas. One of those is distribution of Liquified Petroleum

Gas (LPG) cookers to the refugee families. LPG distribution was started in 2018 to

reduce the huge pressure on Cox's Bazar's remaining forests from fuelwood collection. At the end of 2019, a study by UNHCR-IUCN-East West University showed that the LPG supply had reduced 80 percent of firewood use by refugee families. This success made LPG distribution one of the major activities of the UN agencies in 2020, and by April, they brought all 188,000 refugee families under

refugee crisis, it may refer to the restoration of damaged ecosystems, like the hills, forests and hilly streams, and to the protection of remaining habitats from destruction.

In the Cox's Bazar-Teknaf peninsula, NbS have to be applied in such a way that the altered ecosystems restart giving the services they are supposed to give us—a healthy, green environment to breathe in, stable hill-slopes that are no longer susceptible to landslides due to heavy rain, return of biodiversity to



In 2018, indiscriminate hill-cutting was putting refugees at risk of landslides and damaging natural rescources.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

this activity. This indeed has significantly reduced the pressure on the adjacent forests and their biodiversity.

But slowing down forest destruction is not enough to rebuild the severely degraded ecosystems of Ukhiya and Teknaf. We need appropriate actions on the ground to restore the damage caused by the refugee crisis—we need to apply nature-based solutions (NbS)

NbS are different activities we do to protect, conserve and improve natural and modified ecosystems. But, in the present

an area that became barren in late 2017, sufficiently recharged groundwater, and hilly waterways smoothly carry rainwater without getting too silted up.

Although they are not calling them NbS per se, the UN agencies, their partners, and the Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD) have taken some commendable NbS initiatives to improve the overall environment of the refugee camps. In 2018 and 2019, for example, they reforested about 350 hectares of camp area involving the refugees and host community. They followed the protocol

developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and BFD. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the plantation programme has started in August to replant a couple of hundred hectares of camp area maintaining social distancing and other safety rules.

Innovation is also going on alongside plantation. Last winter, FAO piloted dry season planting techniques in Teknaf. Á 100 percent survival rate of the saplings in the experiment plots suggests that tree plantation in refugee camps would also be possible in the rainless winter months.

Another NbS widely implemented in the camps is stabilising the hill-slopes to avoid devastating landslides. Site Maintenance and Engineering Project (SMEP), a multi-agency partnership, has been creating terraces on tens and thousands of square metres of slopes with bamboo fences, geotextile and reinforced concrete rings, and greening the open soil with vetiver and other grasses and legume saplings, to avoid erosion.

On smaller scales, since 2019, UNHCR and its NGO partner CNRS have been piloting several NbS in the camps, including restoration of hilly streams with banks stabilised with vetiver and vadail grasses and excavation of water reservoirs to reduce pressure on groundwater.

In addition to these short-term, sitespecific actions, there is a need for long-term, holistic approaches to restore the degraded landscape of Cox's Bazar. Realising that, the Center for Global Development, BRAC and The Nature Conservancy advocated for a long-term "forest landscape restoration" (FLR) approach, a type of NbS. While their suggestions are comprehensive and practical, and can effectively engage Bangladeshi host communities outside the camps, involving refugees is difficult in many proposed activities given the uncertainty around refugee repatriation, their possible relocation inside Bangladesh, and the government's position on involving refugees in long-term activities

The piloting, innovations, successes and challenges around different NbS we have tried in Rohingya refugee camps over the last three years bring in three opportunities before us.

First, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) and the University of Oxford have recently launched the NbS Bangladesh web portal (www. nbsbangladesh.info) and the NbS Bangladesh Network of experts and organisations working on NbS. These two new initiatives are giving us the opportunity to capture and widely share Bangladesh's NbS experiences in the refugee crisis. Bangladesh can lead the world on how environmental conservation is possible through NbS even in humanitarian crises.

Second, over the last year or so, NbS has received significant global attention as a practical approach to deal with challenges, like climate change and natural hazards. This February, 20 leading environmental organisations proposed guidelines to make NbS better and successful. In July, the world's largest environmental network IUCN launched the Global Standard for NbS to avoid misuse of the NbS concept. The government of Bangladesh, UN agencies, and their partners now need to recognise these developments as they implement NbS in the refugee camps. Such realisations can strengthen NbS, and thus nature conservation, in the ongoing refugee crisis.

Finally, over the past couple of decades, Bangladesh has been practicing NbS by sustainably managing, protecting and restoring its coasts, forests, hills and wetlands with local communities. Our NbS experience in Cox's Bazar has further shown the superb capacities of Bangladeshi academics, practitioners and administrators to design, implement, innovate and assess NbS projects and related policies. We therefore need to recognise our strengths and start relying upon our own experts, instead of international ones, in nature conservation.

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#### ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



AUGUST 25, 1944 **Paris liberated** 

On this day in 1944, some two months after the Allied invasion of Normandy, Paris was liberated from German occupiers as the Free French 2nd Armoured Division under General Jacques-Philippe Leclerc entered the city.

#### **CROSSWORD** BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS** 1 Fissures 6 "Aladdin" villain 11 Greatly impressed 12 Fancy marble 13 Lover of **Daphnis** 14 Raft pilot 15 Movie computer 16 Day in Tijuana 18 Baseball's Gehrig 19 Yale rooter 20 Tourist stop 21 Amusement 22Detects

24 Table scraps

25 Sub weapon

27 Display

29 Not liable 32 Spinning toy 33 TV watchdog 34 Sticky stuff 35 Everybody 36 Mineral suffix 37 Tire track 38 Comes close

40 Brighten 42 Old gold coin 43 Kitchen gadget 44 Gushes forth 45 Some coasters

**DOWN** 1 Wealth 2 Breathe in 3 Begin to make sense 4 Tango need

5 More run-down 6"Shogun" setting 7 Before today 8 Loss of prestige 9 Went to a diner 10 Much latenight TV fare 17 Check out 23 Boar's mate 24 Praiseful poem

28 Find a place to hide 30 Was sullen 31 Bag handlers 33 Punch ingredients? 39 Unrefined

YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS** 26 Surpasses A Z U R E B O N U S 27 Fans' place AWARE EQUATE SEE N|S|W|E|RALESOUT SNEE DOC 41 Rap's – Nas x APAN DAGE Α

### **BEETLE BAILEY**

WITH ELECTRONIC JNDS TRANSFER AND ONLINE



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