

A portrait of Saiful Hossain, a young man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with some lights.

Saiful Hossain at Kutupalong
Refugee Camp.
PHOTO: SAIFUL HOSSAIN

Three generations stateless

An open-air prison

Saiful Hossain is one of those forgotten Rohingya who has been here since before the evictions of 2017. In fact, his parents had fled to Bangladesh in 1991.

They are among the few thousand in Cox's Bazar who are officially recognised as refugees by Bangladesh and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Saiful was born three years after his parents started living at Dumarunda in Teknaf. That was in 1994. Since then, Saiful has moved to the Kutupalong refugee camp.

Now a father of a son and a daughter, Saiful has never known life outside a refugee camp. Nor do his children. Saiful remembers that the first time he realised he could not have dreams was when he discovered he could not pursue higher studies.

The 28-year-old must have been a starry-eyed second grader when journalists came to speak to them at the camp. They took photos and wrote about the plight of refugees. The young boy was completely taken. He started dreaming of becoming a journalist like them so he too could write about the plight of people.

His dreams came to a cold, hard stop just three years later. There was no schooling available for him beyond the fifth grade. Young Saiful knew then, as he knows now, that the camp was his prison.

"Our world is our camp. We could not even dream of anything beyond it."

In the three decades that his family has been living in the camp, their only improvement has been that the flimsy tarpaulin has been replaced by

a proper roof.

"And the bamboo walls have been replaced by concrete walls," says Saiful, mocking his development trajectory.

"This is like an open-air prison for us. We are all doomed with an indefinite prison sentence, because we don't know when we will be able to return," he says.

Saiful was born in Bangladesh without any possibility of return, just like his children.

"We don't know when we will return to our motherland. We don't know when we will get even our basic rights."

Apparently doomed to this fate, Saiful says his parents became refugees, and he was born a refugee, as were his children.

"There is no escape, it seems. And when I think of that, I feel like ending my life. It is devastating to see that my children's world is also confined to the camp."

Saiful said that their situation worsened since new Rohingya arrived in 2017.

"Our movement was restricted further and our return to Myanmar also became more uncertain."

Although Saiful could not fulfil his dream of becoming a journalist, he continued to chase it, learning from private tutors.

"I saw people of my age doing great things, and I thought I should not give up. I started learning in my own way. I read whatever I got," he said, adding that he learnt the basics of photography when journalists came to the camp.