

Urgent Action

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Rohingya refugees detained on remote island

Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi authorities relocated more than 1,600 Rohingya refugees to Bhashan Char, a remote silt island at the Bay of Bengal, on 4 December 2020. Despite the fact that it has not yet been declared safe for human habitation by the United Nations, about 100,000 Rohingya refugees could be taken from Cox's Bazar to the remote island. With grave concerns for the safety of thousands of Rohingya refugees, Amnesty international is calling on the Bangladeshi authorities to immediately halt the relocation of more people to Bhashan Char, return those already on the island to their families and community in Cox's Bazar and follow the due process, including full and meaningful participation of refugees, for any relocation.

TAKE ACTION:

WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS

OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina,

I am gravely concerned about the lives of the more than 1, 600 Rohingya refugees, who were moved to Bhashan Char island on 4 December 2020, even before the United Nations, human rights and humanitarian agencies have been granted access to conduct independent assessments of the conditions including access to basic freedoms and rights.

It was further distressing to learn that not only have 300 Rohingya refugees been confined on Bhashan Char against their will since May 2020, but an additional 100, 000 others are at risk of immediate relocation. Some Rohingya refugees have told rights organizations that they have been coerced to go to the island.

Bangladesh has provided Rohingya refugees with a second chance at life as they fled the horrors of persecution, however, the confinement of the Rohingya refugees on the island is a violation of Bangladesh's obligations under the ICCPR, and gravely undermines their right to freedom of liberty and freedom of movement.

It is important that a due and transparent process is followed in situations where the international community has a responsibility to support Bangladesh and the Rohingya refugees.

I urge your government to:

• Immediately halt the relocation of more Rohingya refugees to Bhashan Char and return those already on the island to their families and community in Cox's Bazar;

• Allow the UN, humanitarian and rights organizations to carry out independent assessments on Bhashan Char's habitability, access to basic freedoms and rights, and only after it is deemed habitable, open the island to the public, not just the Rohingya;

• Outline in a publicly accessible, transparent and rights-respecting policy framework the participation of Rohingya refugees in the decisions that affect them.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Nearly one million Rohingya, a persecuted mostly Muslim minority in Myanmar, have fled waves of violent attacks in the country since 1978 and sought refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh. The overwhelming majority of them began arriving three years ago, starting on 25 August 2017, when more than 740,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar, after their homes were burned, and at least 10,000 Rohingya men, women and children were killed in the Myanmar military's crimes against humanity.

The Bhashan Char, which in English translates to "floating island", was developed by the Bangladesh Navy and emerged from silt in the Bay of Bengal about 20 years ago. "Its dense mat of cellular housing blocks, encircling embankment and the ocean do not suggest infrastructure conducive to civilian life, but rather the kinds of infrastructure associated with incarceration," wrote Lindsay Bremner, a professor of architecture at the University of Westminster, in an article titled "Sedimentary logics and the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh", published in the ScienceDirect in March 2020.

In September 2020, Amnesty International released the briefing "Let Us Speak for our Rights", where two Rohingya refugees said that they heard accounts of sexual harassment at the hands of police and Navy officials on the island. Instead of commissioning prompt and impartial investigation into the allegations, the authorities vehemently refused. Two weeks prior to the relocation in December 2020, five family members, who represent 23 Rohingya refugees, told Amnesty International that they signed up to relocate to Bhashan

Char out of compulsion rather than a choice. A Rohingya woman on the list for relocation told Amnesty International that she registered to go to the island because her husband is there. As a single parent, with a young child and without any relatives in the camp, she has been facing many problems. “It’s very difficult to live this refugee life. I don’t have any other option. It seems that the government will never allow my husband to get out of the island,” she said.

Two Rohingya families were put on the list for relocation after they reported partial damage of their shelters to government officials and the majhi - a Rohingya community leader selected by Bangladeshi authorities. Instead of having their shelters repaired, they were told that they must relocate to Bhashan Char. Humanitarian staff in the healthcare sector have expressed grave concerns about the relocation. A Rohingya patient of with a mental health condition expressed “complete panic” ahead of the relocation, saying he was being forced to go to Bhashan Char. “He doesn’t know whether he’s going to continue to receive medications there and wanted to collect a few months’ worth,” said one of the staff members. Staff of the prominent healthcare facility told Amnesty International that some of these refugees are on regular medications. As It is unknown whether health care will be made available on the Bhashan Char, there is grave concern their health could destabilize.

Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Bangladesh is a state party, guarantees everyone the right to liberty and prohibits arbitrary detention and deprivation of liberty except with procedures established by law. Article 12 of the ICCPR guarantees everyone within a territory of a state the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose their residence.

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