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ROHINGYA REFUGEES NEED PROTECTION OF THEIR RIGHTS NOW MORE THAN EVER



Monsoon is a difficult season every year for Rohingya refugees. The rain sometimes is a respite from the scorching heat, but it comes with a risk for their lives. The shelters built on tarpaulin and bamboo can barely sustain heavy winds. The rain could wash away their shelters built on muddy hills. An elderly Rohingya man is trying to fix his home in this photograph ahead of a looming storm. This year it's not just the monsoon but a pandemic has added more uncertainty. The Rohingya men, women and children are in a never-ending test for survival.

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FOR A BETTER DAY

Nearly one million Rohingya refugees are living in threadbare camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, after they fled their homes in Myanmar due to the military's crimes against humanity - which are currently the subject of a case under the Convention on the Prevention

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and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide at the International Court of Justice. After four decades of persecution, they long for the better days to come for themselves and their children. But in the refugee camps their struggle to enjoy their human rights is far from over and a new virus has caused more anxiety. Here's a look at their lives in the time of COVID-19.

“ROHINGYA REFUGEES NEED PROTECTION OF THEIR RIGHTS NOW MORE THAN EVER.”

Saad Hammadi, South Asia Campaigner, Amnesty International

Rahima Khatun*, a Rohingya woman, was dragged by the authorities to an isolation facility soon after someone with the same name as hers tested positive for COVID-19 in one of the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Rahima said to caregivers that she had never given a swab in her life, but to no avail. The healthcare facility, where she was brought for isolation, carried out a test on her as she protested.

She had to be in an isolation facility for two days. Once she tested negative the healthcare facility let her go back to her shelter in the camp. Her traumatic experience scared others in the camp. Now people are afraid of testing.

At the end of the second week of June, nearly 400 people were tested in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, home to nearly one million Rohingya with a population density of 40,000 people per square kilometres. About 40 Rohingya refugees have been confirmed with COVID-19 in the camps and two persons have died from the virus as of 15 June. Widespread transmission of the virus cannot be confirmed but healthcare providers are worried that experiences such as that of Rahima Khatun have turned health conditions into stigma for people in the Rohingya community. This has created a trust deficit between the Rohingya and the different actors including *majhis* (camp leaders from Rohingya community), community volunteers and camp in-charge.

There are handful of unexplained deaths among elderly people and a flu epidemic spreading in the camps. "Every other household has some symptoms," said a humanitarian worker. Rumours and anxiety about the consequence of testing positive with coronavirus have resulted in a drop in medical consultations by 50 percent between end of March and first week of May. Hearsays about people who tested positive with coronavirus being killed in response to prevent the spread of the disease have caused fears about reporting illness.

The disruption in some of the services inside the camps is poised to have a long-term impact on the lives of refugees.

An ongoing restriction on access to internet and telecommunications for the Rohingya in the refugee camps has limited their right to seek urgent protection for sexual and gender-based violence, receive prompt and reliable information about COVID-19 and communicate with family members on phone.

The future of more than half a million Rohingya children hangs in balance, with still no access to quality education in the refugee camps. Bangladesh government in January this year agreed in principle to provide Rohingya children, who represent more than half of the refugee population, through the Myanmar curriculum. The education programme, which was supposed to be piloted among 10,000 children by June this year, could not be implemented because of the pandemic.

The pandemic has reduced opportunities for the Rohingya to receive cash for work within the community. For women in the camps, this has meant confinement into domestic settings and increased vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence.

Twenty-seven percent Rohingya women and girls reported experiencing gender-based violence on a normal day without the pandemic, according to a study by the International Rescue Committee. This is said to be a significant underrepresentation of the scale of GBV in the camps where 57 percent of the cases were of physical assault.

Refugees are increasingly seeking informal justice mechanisms and mediation usually from *majhis*, in absence of regular legal counsellors in the camp. In some cases, *majhis* are also exploiting the current situation by asking for money from refugees to facilitate them to access services including healthcare in absence of humanitarian actors.

Amidst this uncertainty, some Rohingya families have their dear ones stranded in the sea for several months. Bangladesh has received two boats with about 700 Rohingya. The first boat with 396 Rohingya arrived in Cox's Bazar on 16 April. Bangladeshi authorities on 7 May towed a second boat with another 277 Rohingya to Bhashan Char, a remote silt island, that has yet to complete a safety and sustainability assessment by the UN. Another 30 Rohingya refugees who came ashore in Cox's Bazar around the same time after several weeks in the sea were subsequently sent by the Bangladesh authorities to Bhashan Char. The authorities said that the 307 Rohingya people have been taken there to complete the quarantine procedure. It has been more than a month now and they are still away from their families in the remote island. The Rohingya refugees kept in the island for an indefinite period could be victims of arbitrary detention.

The World Refugee Day today is a reminder to the world that there are hundreds of thousands of people displaced by conflict whose human rights are no less than ours. The Rohingya have suffered for nearly four decades becoming victims of crimes against humanity. COVID-19 must not be an excuse to deprive the Rohingya refugees of their human rights. Bangladesh and the international community must protect the rights of the Rohingya refugees by sharing responsibility through continued cooperation and assistance.

** Real names have been changed to protect the identity of the person.*
