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Rohingya refugees trigger humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh

Numbers fleeing Myanmar have mounted to 350,000 amid continuing monsoon rains and a government aid ban in Myanmar

An elderly Rohingya woman being carried to a dry place in Cox's Bazar on Sept 10. (ucanews.com photo)

Stephan Uttom, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh and John Zaw, Mandalay, Myanmar
Myanmar

September 11, 2017

Bangladesh is bracing for a massive humanitarian crisis because of a lack of food, sanitation and medicines and even basic housing following the exodus of as many as 350,000 Muslim Rohingya from Myanmar, fleeing deadly violence that has seen at least 1,000 killed in just two weeks.

The roadside and areas along the major highway from Ukhiya to Teknaf in Cox's Bazar, just across the river from Rakhine, are swollen with new refugees who have set up makeshift camps with bamboos and polythene sheets to brave monsoon rains. The numbers are heavy with women, children and old people who face an utterly uncertain future without citizenship of any nation or even bare essentials.

Some aid groups and generous local people have sporadically provided relief materials to refugees on the Bangladesh side of the border, unlike Myanmar where aid has been stopped by the government. Aid trucks arriving quickly ran out of food food as thousands of hungry people envelope them as they stopped.

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At least 300,000 Rohingya Muslims have entered Bangladesh in a fortnight following a military crackdown in northern Rakhine triggered by Aug. 25 Rohingya militant attacks on security check posts, according to United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

However, local sources claim the number is higher as Rohingya continue to pour into Bangladesh.

"We believe more than 350,000 Rohingya have arrived so far — there is almost no space left near the highway and existing unregistered camps are bursting with new refugees. They need emergency food, medicine and housing aid, or an epidemic might break out any time," Hamidur Rahman, a local politician from Teknaf told ucanews.com.

Abdul Wahab, 30, reached Bangladesh with his five-member family on Sept. 9 following a seven-day journey. He now resides in a roadside camp in Ukhiya.

"I cannot remember when we ate last in Myanmar before entering Bangladesh. We received some parched rice and molasses from a food truck," Wahab from Nappura area told ucanews.com Sept. 10.

He said military had bombed their village using a helicopter and their home was destroyed, all their belongings were lost.

"My five-year-old daughter had a nosebleed due to smoke from bombing, she is still sick and she needs medical support. We need a place to live and food for survival," he added.

Some Rohingya wanted get back to their homes to get supplies but were unable as Myanmar military allegedly planted landmines to restrict their re-entry. Myanmar's military and government, who refer to the Rohingya as Bengalis, have made it clear that they are unwanted as successive regimes have denied them citizenship, voting rights and access to government services.

An Rohingya boy was injured while fleeing to Bangladesh from violence in Rakhine State of Myanmar. (ucanews.com photo)

"We wanted to get into Myanmar to get some essentials, and found some uprooted trees and displaced soil. We realized landmines has been planted and we returned back after pulling out some bombs," Muhammad Taher, 23, from Buthidaung told ucanews.com Sept. 10.

A member of Border Guards Bangladesh, on condition of anonymity, said that Myanmar border police have planted landmines at the border.

have laid mines in their border area but surely it is intended to stop Rohingya from going back to Myanmar," he told ucanews.com.

Eight-year-old Muhammad Johar is sitting near temporary medical center in Teknaf with his head bandaged.

"When we fled to Bangladesh, the military started firing at our backs and we ran for our lives. Johar stumbled, his head hit a tree and got injured," a neighbor of Johar's family told ucanews.com.

Doctor Muhammad Iqbal from the medical camp said they are offering primary medical support to injured and sick Rohingyas.

"Most patients are too weak, because they didn't eat for days and they are suffering from dehydration and fever. We offer them saline and primary treatment for injuries, and refer them to hospitals as necessary," Iqbal told ucanews.com.

Rahima Khatun, 45, has lost her four sons in the hands of the military and has been separated from her husband over two weeks.

"I have seen how brutally the military killed my sons and I lost contact with my husband while fleeing to Bangladesh. I don't know whether he is dead or alive," a tearful Rahima told ucanews.com.

She said despite the food and housing crisis she feels safe in Bangladesh.

"At least I know I won't be killed, but we need food and a place to live urgently," she added.

James Gomes, regional director of Caritas Chittagong expressed concerns over the Rohingya crisis.

Rohingya refugees line up for treatment at a temporary medical camp in Cox's Bazar on Sept. 10. (ucanews.com photo)

"The situation is so pathetic — people living under an open sky, without food, clothes and medicines, getting wet in the rain. If we cannot help them adequately, an epidemic is due due to unhealthy conditions like open toilets," Gomes, who visited refugees this week, told ucanews.com.

Caritas is planning to distribute food and other essentials to Rohingyas and will begin delivering it once donors secure necessary funds, he added.

Rohingya militants declare ceasefire

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the militant group responsible for attacks on Myanmar military and government posts on Aug. 25, which resulted in an escalation of violence by Myanmar's military, announced a month-long unilateral ceasefire starting on Sept. 10 to allow humanitarian aid in Rakhine State.

ARSA made the announcement on Twitter and strongly urged the Myanmar government to "reciprocate this humanitarian pause." Zaw Htay, the government's spokesperson, said on Twitter "We have no policy to negotiate with terrorists."

In addition to the Rohingya influx to Bangladesh, over 30,000 ethnic Rakhine have been displaced internally displaced because of the violence in the region.

Kyaw Min, chairman of Yangon-based Rohingya party Democracy and Human Rights, condemned ARSA's acts but expressed his concern for civilians as nearly half of the Muslims population in

"It is hard to say if it is ethnic cleansing but the rising numbers of people forced to leave Rakhine is very alarming," Kyaw Min told ucanews.com.

Nyan Win, a central committee member of ruling National League for Democracy party blamed ARSA for the latest Rakhine crisis.

"What I see is that thousands of Bengalis who are not originally from Myanmar have fled to their homes rather than forced to flee their homes," Nyan Win told ucanews.com.

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