



Rohingya refugee crisis

Internews Assessment – September 2017

Background

Nearly 300,000 members of Myanmar's Rohingya minority have poured across the international border into Bangladesh since the end of August, fleeing ethnic/religious persecution and violence that erupted in the northwest Rakhine state. Hundreds have been killed, shot while trying to escape or drowning during the perilous journey across the Naf River, which separates the two countries. Desperate men, women and children, who have been walking for days braving gunfire, landmines and treacherous terrain to reach Bangladesh are spending nights in the open, unsure where to go or how to access medicine and food. The Bangladeshi government says it cannot afford to house and feed the new arrivals, which join an existing Rohingya refugee population estimated to be over 600,000 already.

United Nations officials have warned that the number of displaced Rohingyas in Bangladesh could rise quickly to 800,000 as the conflict in northwest Myanmar escalates. A number of factors stand to exacerbate this crisis:

- **Insensitive and inflammatory reporting** by some Bangladeshi news organizations, which threatens to turn local public opinion against the refugees and make it more difficult for Rohingya families to access assistance. Some Bangladeshi media outlets are describing families fleeing violence as intruders, illegal trespassers and worse. One such headline: "Rohingyas are entering like termites." Such reporting dehumanizes refugees, feeds prejudice and violates the 'do no harm' principle of journalism.
- **Rumors and misinformation.** Images and videos circulating on social media are inflaming emotions in Bangladesh and the region but are difficult to verify. Some are old photos from outbursts of violence in Rakhine in 2011 and 2012. Some are from other conflict spots like Sudan and Mali. There is also a flood of new visuals that portray the brutality of the crisis in Rakhine. There are rumors and lies circulating within the Rohingya camps as well, prompting refugees to take unnecessary and potentially fatal risks. There appears to be little or no attempt by mainstream Bangladeshi news organizations to verify and fact-check the material, a situation that threatens to compound the Rakhine crisis and spark fresh tensions between Muslim and Buddhist communities in Bangladesh.
- **Threat of violent extremism.** The possibility of radicalization is rising among disgruntled Rohingya youth who have seen their community marginalized and persecuted in Rakhine for decades. The emergence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an armed group which says it is fighting for Rohingya rights, has become a magnet for young Rohingyas looking to strike back at the Myanmar army. Transnational jihadist networks like ISIS and al-Qaeda could move to take advantage.

Although the crisis facing Rohingya communities in Rakhine – and now regionally, in Bangladesh and elsewhere – is by no means new, the dramatic escalation in recent weeks has led to an unprecedented level of humanitarian need for the Rohingya people. The Bangladesh National Human Rights Council is among an increasing number of organizations and individuals prepared to label the crisis as ‘tantamount to genocide’.¹ Access to information has played a central role in the current situation. Lack of information, misinformation, and outright propaganda, have driven the conflict, raising tensions on all sides, stoking rumors, emboldening extremist elements, and masking atrocities. The Rohingya community in particular is remarkably vulnerable to this risk.

There is no accessible Rohingya language media, leaving the Rohingya population of up to 1.5 million, now spread between Myanmar and Bangladesh, reliant on information only available in languages other than their own. Trust levels in Rakhine and Burmese language outlets are, unsurprisingly, extremely low.² Further exacerbating this situation, access to northern Rakhine is highly restricted, including for humanitarian actors and journalists, making it extremely difficult for outside sources - such as international media - to provide useful or practical information for affected communities on the ground.

Within this vacuum Rohingya communities are forced to rely on word-of-mouth. These trust networks extend beyond face-to-face communication, however, and although connectivity is limited, information (and misinformation) is effectively spread through mobile and social media.³ Platforms such as Facebook and Viber are popular, as are politized YouTube and streaming sites such as Rohingya Vision, which operates out of Malaysia.⁴ These networks provide an invaluable resource, but at the same time spread dangerous rumors and misinformation.

The recent and dramatic escalation of the ongoing Rohingya crisis has resulted, thus far, in more than 300,000 people crossing the border from Myanmar into Bangladesh since the 25th of August.⁵ According to the Inter Sector Coordination Group, the majority of arrivals are still on the move, with limited information available to them on where to go, or how to access desperately needed humanitarian services. These new arrivals join the more than 300,000 Rohingya ‘Undocumented Myanmar Nationals’ (UMNs), displaced from earlier bouts of conflict, and who are already located around Cox’s Bazar, in camps and informal settlements.⁶ People continue to make the crossing to escape the violence, and these numbers are expected to rise.

According to the latest report from the Inter Sector Coordination Group on September 7th, **there is an urgent need for more timely and widely accessible information sharing, including clear and uniform messaging on humanitarian assistance to the influx population.**⁷ The establishment of an information hub and strengthened Communication with Communities, including information on where to access

¹ <http://www.unb.com.bd/bangladesh-news/Persecution-of-Rohingyas-tantamount-to-genocide-NHRC/50405>

² Rakhine State News and Information Ecosystem, A Rapid Assessment, Internews, December 2016

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ September 6th, ISCG Cox’s Bazar Influx Situation Report, <https://cxbcoordination.org/>

⁶ July 30th, ISCG Rohnigya Situation in Cox’s Bazar Situation Report, <https://cxbcoordination.org/>

⁷ https://cxbcoordination.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/170907_ISCG-SitRep_Influx-2017.pdf

essential needs such as food, shelter aid and other services, have been identified as major needs, particularly for male-heads of house seeking resources for their families.⁸

Internews conducted two assessments, one inside Myanmar (December 2016) and one at the border with Bangladesh (August 2017) and found that:

- The people stranded on the border **do not have enough food or medicine**. Many of them are still trying to cross the mountains, dense bush and rice fields to reach Bangladesh. Several of them were shot while trying to cross the border or were wounded in **landmine explosions**.
- The majority of the people stranded at the borders are **women and children, with no information available in their language** about: health and hygiene; pre-natal and post-natal care (1000 children have been reported to be born in the no man's land in the last 2 weeks); UXO and mine awareness; and how and where to access services.
- During the last week, there has been an **increase of cyber-war/hate speech activities** in Myanmar connected with the position of Turkey in the Rohingya situation.
- At the moment the **limited amount of Rohingya language information circulating is heavily politicized and potentially influenced by extremist elements**. This highlights the need for more reliable, balanced, accurate and verifiable sources of information both inside Myanmar and at the border. On the Bangladesh side, the local population is increasingly frustrated with the influx of refugees, which may lead to tensions in the long-term.
- There is currently **no mechanism in place to systematically assess needs and help people who are fleeing Myanmar**, leaving starving and exhausted Rohingya families to fend for themselves under the open sky in Bangladesh. Most of the arrivals don't know how to access food and medical aid. The existing camps in Cox's Bazar are already overcrowded and the danger of waterborne diseases is high.

The humanitarian situation in Bangladesh

The Bangladesh government said this week that new arrivals would be registered at the border to help manage the influx. But in three days, local officials were only able to register about 1,500 Rohingyas, underlining the magnitude of the task. Last week, the United Nations appealed for \$77 million to cope with the crisis but now UN officials on the ground say the need could be several times as high since the number of refugees has gone up dramatically.

Paradoxically, the Bangladesh government is bemoaning its lack of resources to deal with the crisis when it has for years controlled access and restricted aid flow to the Rohingya. Three international NGOs who have been on the ground in Cox's Bazar for years - Doctors without Borders (MSF) and Action Against Hunger (ACF) as well as Britain's Muslim Aid UK – have had to operate below the radar since Dhaka refused to give formal permission, arguing that they were creating a "pull factor" for refugees.

⁸ Ibid.

As part of government policy, the NGO Affairs Bureau in Dhaka has withheld FD-6 and FD-7 project approval in the Cox's Bazar area in health, education and other sectors, even if it benefits the local Bangladeshi community. The Bangladesh government has held the registration issue as a sword over NGOs working with Rohingya, presumably to allow officials to pull the plug when they want.

The government in Dhaka has refused to allow the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to register Rohingya arrivals since 1992. This means all but 30,000 of the Rohingyas are denied refugee status. The unregistered Rohingyas – more than 200,000 even before the current influx – are officially considered illegal migrants and cannot get food rations provided by the World Food Program. They are also denied access to basic healthcare and education provided by the UNHCR and its partner organizations.

The government has also put a stop to the UNHCR's resettlement program, under which hundreds of Rohingyas were resettled in third countries to restart their lives. Most went to Australia, the UK and Canada. In November 2010, the Bangladesh government suspended the program, pending a review. Rohingya children in the camp are permitted to study up to seventh grade – but not beyond.

Such restrictions are creating barriers for the Rohingya to access effective aid. Unless lifted, they may limit efforts by international NGOs to mobilise to aid the Rohingya refugees.

Internews Media Assessment

- There are essentially zero media outlets or 'traditional' mass communication platforms in the Rohingya language, or with information specifically for this group (around **1.5million people** between Myanmar and Bangladesh).
- The most popular media outlet for Rohingya is apparently a YouTube channel called Rohingya Vision, which runs out of Malaysia – but even that is mostly in English and seems to be focused on advocacy at the moment. So people are basically relying on Facebook, YouTube, Viber and good old fashioned word-of-mouth.
- The news media in Bangladesh is clearly not well equipped to cover a conflict like this.
- On Myanmar side, there is virtually no "independent and objective" media in Rakhine.
- Even a more "traditional" media development program (support for local media outlets), trainings, creating new distribution channels and media-CSO relation stuff will be hugely beneficial.
- There's potentially a very important 'anti-radicalization' angle. At the moment the limited amount of Rohingya language information circulating is heavily politicized and potentially influenced by extremist elements.
- The assessment mission saw plenty of bullet-riddled bodies and corpses of drowned people on the Naf River. Part of the problem has been lack of documentation on the Myanmar side. The fake photos and videos are inflaming tensions, but also actually distracting from what is a serious humanitarian crisis.



- There are also lots of hate speech happening and very little being done to counter it. Myanmar does have laws to combat hate speech (66d) for example, but it's never been used in that way and used instead to silence journalists and critics of the government.
- FB it is being wildly used as a platform for hate speech.
- There is a huge need to get journalists involved and it could be broader than photo verification only. There is a need to do fact-checking/verification training broadly.