

Increased tension between the local community and Rohingya refugees has been an increasingly visible issue in Cox's Bazar, particularly since August 2019. To better understand the current underlying concerns and worries of host communities in Cox's Bazar, BBC Media Action undertook small-scale explorative research in September 2019. We talked to both male and female members of the local community; NGO workers who have been working closely with local people; and some local government personnel. The study was carried out in collaboration with Dan Church Aid and another international agency, who supported with access to host communities in Maheshkhali, Teknaf and Ukhiya. This article summarises the underlying causes and concerns identified by the research.

## Fear, distrust, shift in demographics, misinformation – contributing to the increased tension between local people and the Rohingya community

### We are worried they might kill us

There is a local prophecy that has been passed down through many generations in the local community in Ukhiya and Teknaf and that local community members have heard from their grandparents, who in turn heard it from their own grandparents. The myth is that *a day will come when the old Feni river will turn red with human blood and will be flooded with severed human heads*. This myth is deep rooted within the local community. Many people we spoke to believe that the day in the prophecy might be quite near and fear that the heads mentioned will be those of people from the local community. There is a strong sense of fear for life, driven by a perception (among the host community) that Rohingya people believe that Teknaf and Ukhiya originally belonged to their Rohingya ancestors.

Local people mentioned that they sometimes exchange heated words with Rohingya people, who they say believe that the local area belongs to the Rohingya people. People have heard that the road from Cox's Bazar to Rakhine was previously known as the 'Arakan Road' and have also heard stories that Rohingya people intend to claim the areas south of Feni district. Through a combination of myths and fears, people feel that they are being threatened to leave the area by Rohingya refugees.

The enormous shift in the demographic in the area is also an important influencer of local people's morale. People feel that they are now in the minority, and that Rohingya people feel that they are in the majority in the area. Local people

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feel that it would be very easy for Rohingya people to kill or attack them, if they decided to. This fear among the local community has increased after the gathering organised by the Rohingya community to mark the anniversary of the 2017 influx.

“ I work with Rohingyas as a labourer. A few days ago, they told me to leave this area because they think, now, they are the owner of this area.”

– Man, 30+, Teknaf

“ In our country, if anyone wants to arrange an assembly, they are supposed to take permission from government. How could they arrange such huge assembly without any permission from government? So, how can we believe that they will not attack us. We are only 3 lakhs population here, but they are 16 lakhs. Will we be able to defend ourselves? We are now minority group here.”

– Man, 30+, Teknaf

“ Before, they fought among themselves. But now they are attacking us. We have heard they have machetes and guns in every house.”

– Woman, 18-29, Ukhiya

## Practical concerns are intensifying...

The practical concerns that local people have communicated over the past two years have been well documented in previous editions of *What Matters?*. The issues being raised now by local people remain similar, although there is a sense that problems are perceived to have got worse recently. Broadly, the practical issues that the host community are most concerned about are:

- Fewer income generating opportunities
- Movement restrictions due to multiple check posts
- Price increased in necessary commodities
- Restricted mobile communication
- Traffic congestion due to increased number of vehicles
- Increased crime rate

People say that, since they have been facing these issues for some time, it has taken a toll on their social, economic and emotional life.

“Nowadays we cannot have a peaceful sleep because they [Rohingya people] are thieves and robbers; and now they are killing our people.”

– Woman, 18-29, Ukhiya

People mentioned that, although they have been facing similar problems since the beginning of the Rohingya influx, they feel that the intensity of these problems has increased with time. For example, they believe that the crime rate has increased recently and say that they have first-hand experience of observing this increased rate of criminal activities – including by seeing more refugees attending local hospitals with injuries sustained during fighting. Several people mentioned their belief that some Rohingya men are now working as ‘contract killers’, saying that people from the local (host) community are hiring Rohingya people to do their ‘dirty’ work in exchange for money.

Another key issue of concern is the difficulty in obtaining national identity cards or registering to vote. People feel that it is becoming extremely difficult for local people to get a national ID card because the system for registrations has been suspended in the local

area. They feel that, if they lost their NID card, their Bangladeshi citizenship would be over. They say that they are struggling to obtain an NID card for their children, noting that the card is an important document to get admission to college or university.

“Earlier we needed exactly four documents to get an NID, but now we need more than 20 documents. And the online server is closed now. So, it seems we are not citizens of Bangladesh.”

– Man, 30+, Teknaf

Some people mentioned that refugees are better able to obtain an NID card because they believe that Rohingya people can provide higher bribes than the local people. Local people believe that most refugees are involved in the amphetamine (yaba) trade and that this income, alongside the perception that refugees receive significant amounts of food and other products for free, means that Rohingya people are able to save a lot of money to spend on bribes for NID cards, passports or to escape from the camps. Local people also criticised members of the Bangladeshi community who they said were helping refugees with these illegal activities, noting that the greed of a small number of people was hurting the whole community and country.

“The host community people who are helping Rohingya people (with illegal activities) are our first enemy, they are the one who are responsible for these incidents...”

– Woman, 30+, Ukhiya

People living in areas further away from the camp still had concerns – but not in such a stark way as those living in Ukhiya and Teknaf. The fear for life was not found in other upazillas; although many of the practical concerns expressed were similar. In Moheshkhali, for example, key worries were around the government moving to re-acquire *khas land* (land belonging to government but which is often ceded to local people for housing or cultivation) where they have been living for generations; and a heavy reduction in the price of salt (many people in the area are salt farmers).



## I won't marry a girl who is working with an NGO in the camp

Local people acknowledge that humanitarian organisations<sup>1</sup> are helping Rohingya people a lot, and that this help is necessary. They also think that, if humanitarian agencies close their activities in the camps, Rohingya people would be more likely to attack the local community. They understand that humanitarian agencies are providing sanitation, family planning, hygiene and infrastructure service in the camps and that they are also distributing items including food and beauty products. But sometimes local people feel that the support that refugees are receiving is too much. They say that local markets are flooded with relief items and that Rohingya people are selling door to door in the local community, leading them to believe that what refugees are receiving is more than they need. They feel that, while Rohingya people are getting everything they need, local people are being neglected by the humanitarian agencies. According to the host community, they deserve to get the same facilities as are being provided to refugees or, if it is not possible to provide services to everyone, then at least to poorer people within the host community. Some people suggested that humanitarian agencies could provide them with support at least every other month, if it was not possible to support them all the time. They feel that this will help them to have a better livelihood.

“ NGOs are giving rice, daal, oil, soap, everything. You can ask me – what are they not giving to Rohingya people? Whatever a family needs, they provide everything to them.”

– Woman, 30+, Ukhiya

“ NGOs provide everything that a Rohingya family needs. From food to furniture, they provide everything. They even provide Fair & Lovely [beauty cream] for the Rohingya girls.”

– Man, 30+, Teknaf

In recent weeks, it seems that the reputation of humanitarian agencies has become tainted within the local community. There are widespread stories of international agencies attempting to convert Muslims to Christians; and of humanitarian workers exploiting local girls in exchange for jobs. Some people also recalled an incident of a couple working in a relief agency who were arrested in a Cox's Bazar hotel due to an illegal physical relationship. While recognising that they had not witnessed this particular event and therefore not being sure it was true, people say that it is contributing to a general sense that women working for humanitarian agencies do not have good character. These stories have led to some local young men declining to marry women who work in the camp.

“ When a family comes with a marriage proposal, the first question they will ask to the groom's family is whether the bride is working in the camp or not. If she has any history of working in the camps, the groom's family will break the alliance. I have seen it in my neighbour's family.”

– Woman, 30+, Ukhiya

One participant mentioned that she had declined a job opportunity from a humanitarian agency because of a fear of social shaming. However, those who are looking for a job say that they are struggling to get one. They believe that getting a job includes paying bribes and that, even if they agree to pay, Rohingya people can afford to bribe more because they are earning money by selling their surplus relief items or doing business in the markets in the camp. People say that those who do get offered a job are being threatened by the Rohingya community and advised not to come near the camp. They also believe that some international agencies do not want Rohingya people to go back and believe some are working against repatriation.

<sup>1</sup> The local community refer to 'NGOs' – but their understanding of 'NGO' also includes UN agencies.

## We do not believe news from Facebook, but...

When local people were asked where they got information regarding the Rohingya crisis, men said that they got most of their news from friends and relatives who live adjacent to the camps or who run small businesses in or near the camps. People described how they discuss Rohingya-related issues while having their evening tea in the local tea stalls and said that their discussions were dominated by repatriation, increasing criminal activities and recent Rohingya demonstrations in the camp.

“ When we sit in the tea stall, everybody wants to know what is the situation regarding repatriation? When will they go back?”

– Man, 30+, Teknaf

These discussions in the tea stalls, or other informal gatherings, mostly revolve around information that has originated in local newspapers – all male participants cited local newspapers as a source of the information that they discuss or argue about with their friends and family. Facebook also plays an interesting part in this information system: while almost every participant said that they did not believe any news that they saw on Facebook, news stories which are shared (on Facebook or on Messenger) by friends and family members are trusted. Indeed, the same story received via a friend is likely to have much more veracity than if that story was received directly from its primary source.

For local women, the Rohingya community themselves are the main source of information regarding the emergency. Women say that, when Rohingya people come to sell their relief items, they tend stay then for a while and discuss what is happening in the camp as well as talking about their own condition. Some women also said that they saw information on Facebook.

“ We do not believe news stories on Facebook. But when any of my friends tell me that he/she found this information in the Facebook, I believe that information.”

– Woman, 18-29, Ukhiya

BBC Media Action and Translators without Borders are working together to collect and collate feedback from communities affected by the Rohingya crisis. This summary aims to provide a snapshot of feedback received from Rohingya and host communities, to assist sectors to better plan and implement relief activities with communities' needs and preferences in mind.

*The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, nor do the views expressed necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.*

## We will be forced to go to Bhashanchar...

Most local people do not think that Rohingya people will return to Myanmar. People said that they could not see any reason why Rohingya people would want to go back, since they were getting everything they needed in Bangladesh and receiving lots of support from different organisations. People also mentioned that Rohingya people were enjoying certain freedoms in Bangladesh which they were not entitled to have back in Myanmar. Local people also feel that local laws are not properly applied to refugees: they feel that the Rohingya people are treated as 'guests' and they are exploiting that status. People also said that local authorities are sometimes very reluctant to apply the law to Rohingya people whenever members of the host community try to complain – for example if they accuse a Rohingya person of stealing. They said that most of the local authorities request them to 'adjust', but participants said that they were finding it nearly impossible to adjust as they believe that Rohingya people have changed a lot since they first arrived in Bangladesh. People felt that Rohingya people had become more aggressive, arrogant and mischievous and that the refugees' wealth – through trading drugs and selling surplus relief items – had led to an attitude of them being the majority community in the local areas.

“ At the beginning we have given them shelter but their attitudes have changed over the time. Also, their financial condition has improved overtime and they have become arrogant. That's why our relationship has changed now.”

– Man, 30+, Teknaf

This precarious relationship between the two communities has led to some local people believing that they might be forced to relocate to Bhashanchar themselves in the coming years. Since they do not believe that Rohingya people will ever return to Myanmar, they fear that, one day, the Rohingya people will attack them and force them to Bhashanchar.

“ We think the Rohingya people will send us to Bhashanchar. And we will be obliged to go there because when 10 lakhs of them will attack us – what will we do? We will be forced to leave this area.”

– Man, 30+, Teknaf

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If you have any comments, questions or suggestions regarding *What Matters?*, you are welcome to get in touch with the team by emailing [info@cxbfeedback.org](mailto:info@cxbfeedback.org)