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By the International Crisis Group

Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Limiting the Damage of a Protracted Crisis

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh looks set to drag on indefinitely. Insecurity in the overcrowded camps is growing. In this excerpt from the [Watch List 2023 – Autumn Update](#), Crisis Group urges Europe to keep providing humanitarian assistance and increase its intake of refugees.

The future looks increasingly bleak for the close to one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, most of whom who were forced out of western Myanmar more than six years ago. The 2021 coup in Myanmar brought to power the same military officers whose brutality toward the Muslim minority in Rakhine State in 2016-2017 pushed them across the border. Although the regime insists it wants repatriation to begin, it has refused to guarantee citizenship to returnees. Meanwhile, the situation in Rakhine State has become more complex, due to the growing strength of the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group that is fighting for greater autonomy for the Rakhine Buddhist majority and now controls much of the state's centre and north.

The refugees are facing mounting problems in their overcrowded camps. International aid is declining sharply, forcing the UN to cut vital food assistance by one third in 2023. At the same time, insecurity is growing. Poverty and hopelessness threaten to create a vicious cycle in which refugees – particularly young men – join criminal gangs and armed groups, fuelling the violence. Women and girls are embarking

on risky boat journeys or overland travel (via Myanmar and Thailand) to Malaysia – their trips often paid for by waiting Rohingya men in exchange for marriage. Others stay and are married off at a young age. Bangladesh, despite having earned global praise for hosting the large Rohingya population, is getting impatient with the attendant burdens. By refusing to acknowledge that the crisis will likely drag on indefinitely and planning accordingly, Dhaka risks making a difficult situation worse.

The EU and its member states can help address this set of challenges by:

- Increasing funding for the UN's humanitarian appeal in Bangladesh to help meet the needs of Rohingya refugees, lest camp conditions deteriorate further. With violence on the rise, it is particularly important that the EU expand its support for protection services for vulnerable refugees, including community leaders and young men at risk of harm by armed groups, and women facing intimate partner violence; its member states should also consider accepting the most vulnerable for third-country resettlement.

- Using the EU's influential position in Bangladesh to encourage Dhaka to adopt a long-term strategy recognising that the vast majority of the refugees are likely to remain in the country for years to come. Although integration may not be politically feasible, refugees need greater access to education and better job opportunities so that they can live in dignity. The EU should make clear that, if Dhaka changes tack, it stands ready to mobilise additional funding for projects that reduce the need for humanitarian aid, such as income generation and durable shelter.
- Maintaining, to the extent possible, humanitarian support for Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State. It should work directly with local service providers, which may help navigate restrictions imposed by Naypyitaw, and also avoid inadvertently strengthening the regime or legitimising its initiatives, such as the planned closure of camps for the internally displaced. To improve coordination at the national level, the EU should lobby the UN to appoint an experienced permanent resident coordinator.
- Continuing to support international efforts to hold Myanmar's military accountable for its abuses against the Rohingya and other groups in Myanmar, both prior to and since the coup.

Dwindling Hopes for Repatriation

The Rohingya refugees in southern Bangladesh are facing increasingly grim prospects of returning to their homes in Myanmar, as conditions in the camps become ever more difficult. Over the last two years, international funding for basic, life-saving services has dropped dramatically as crises elsewhere grab attention and donor fatigue sets in. The shortfall is particularly acute in 2023: with the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan barely 40 per cent funded, the UN has been compelled to slash food aid by one third. It now spends just \$0.27 per day on each person's rations. There have also been cuts to other services. Shrinking budgets have forced the UN and international NGOs to lay off refugees from paid volunteer roles that, due to Bangladeshi government restrictions, are one of their few legal sources of income. Given the many other emergencies around the world, including Russia's war in Ukraine, this decline is only likely to continue in the coming years.

Meanwhile, violence is steadily increasing in the sprawling camps as armed groups and crime rings entrench themselves among the refugees. For a time, the dominant such group was the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which carried out the attacks in Myanmar in

2016-2017 that prompted the military's violent campaign against the Rohingya. But in September 2021, ARSA overreached when it killed a prominent Rohingya community leader, Mohib Ullah, drawing international attention to the problem of rising violence in the camps. The killing spurred Dhaka into action, and security forces began cracking down on ARSA by arresting some of its members.

Other armed groups have taken advantage of a weakened ARSA. Bangladeshi authorities say no fewer than eleven are now active in the camps. Over the past year, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) in particular has grown in power, gradually wresting control of several camps from ARSA. Many of these groups work closely with Bangladeshi crime syndicates to move drugs – mostly yaba (a mix of methamphetamine and caffeine) but increasingly crystal methamphetamine, which is much more lucrative – over the border from Myanmar and to major markets in Dhaka and Chattogram, a southern coastal city.

Turf wars among ARSA, RSO and other groups have erupted. The number of killings so far in 2023 is already higher than in all of 2022; the victims are typically young men or those in community leadership positions, although

women and children are sometimes caught in the crossfire. Abductions, in which gangs hold refugees for ransom, have also skyrocketed. Bangladesh's Armed Police Battalion, the agency in charge of camp security since 2020, has been unable to bring the gangs to heel. It has also faced well-substantiated allegations that its members are **shaking down, wrongfully detaining** and even **torturing** refugees themselves.

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh and Myanmar's military regime have, since the beginning of 2023 and with Chinese support, sought to start repatriating Rohingya refugees to Rakhine State, following two failed attempts in 2018 and 2019. Each country has its own reasons for wanting Rohingya to return. Naypyitaw hopes it can strengthen its defence at the International Court of Justice, where it has been accused of violating the Genocide Convention, and relieve international pressure in the wake of the 2021 coup. Dhaka has its eye on the general election planned for January 2024, before which it hopes to have a foreign policy victory that dilutes the public's impatience with hosting of such a large refugee population. As for Beijing, it is seeking opportunities to portray itself as a constructive international player, amid heightened tensions with Washington, and also hoping to gain further support from Dhaka and Naypyitaw in Asia.

Yet despite assurances from both Dhaka and Naypyitaw, a proposed "pilot project", under which a first contingent of 1,176 refugees would go back to Rakhine State, is unlikely to proceed. The Myanmar regime has sent several delegations to visit the refugees in Bangladesh and, in May, refugee leaders even travelled to Maungdaw in northern Rakhine for a visit intended to show them that it is safe. In September, following a fresh round of meetings, the regime and Bangladesh announced plans to repatriate up to 7,000 refugees by the end of the year. But Myanmar has refused to meet key refugee demands, particularly regarding citizenship (which most Rohingya lack), a stance that is

likely to limit the number of candidates willing to return.

Another factor complicating repatriation is the emergence of the Arakan Army as a political force in Rakhine State. Since the 2021 coup, the group has **gained control of much of the countryside** in central and northern Rakhine, including along the Bangladeshi border. Repatriation at scale is thus likely to be possible only with the group's agreement. Yet, so far, it has been left out of discussions between the two governments.

The bottom line is that for most refugees, going home remains a distant prospect. While the sheer desperation of life in the Bangladesh camps may persuade a small minority of Rohingya to return notwithstanding the risks, that is hardly something to celebrate. The conditions in Rakhine State are not conducive to safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation, and they are unlikely to be as long as the military regime is in power.

At the same time, the Bangladeshi government refuses to consider viable alternatives for addressing the refugee crisis. Insisting that speedy repatriation is the only way forward, it has imposed restrictions on camp operations and refugee liberties that leave Rohingya almost entirely dependent on outside aid and compel humanitarian groups to keep operating on an emergency footing rather than prepare for prolonged displacement. It has also shifted around 30,000 Rohingya to Bhasan Char, a low-lying silt island almost 40km from the mainland, where acute exposure to cyclones adds a new dimension to their vulnerability. Dhaka's policies – ranging from denying refugees the right to work to insisting that they live in temporary shelters and remain inside fenced camps or on Bhasan Char – are adding to the humanitarian response's cost at a time when international funding is declining.

If it does not change, Bangladesh's policy is likely to make a bad situation worse in the years ahead. Making life more difficult for Rohingya refugees will inevitably push them toward

dangerous coping strategies. Unless conditions in the camps improve, those unable to find a way out may grow more susceptible to militancy as time passes. Men and boys may enlist in armed groups or gangs. Girls and women may wind up in underage marriages or in arranged marriages in Malaysia that require them to brave the seas in rickety boats captained by

unscrupulous human smugglers to reach their new spouses. Increasingly, Rohingya are also making the hazardous trek to Malaysia overland through Myanmar and Thailand, where they risk arrest for violating immigration laws. In the wake of further cuts to food rations in June, there have been growing reports of intimate partner violence and malnutrition.

The Situation in Rakhine State

Living conditions are also worsening for most of the Rohingya who still live in Rakhine State. More than 120,000 remain confined to displacement camps that were set up over a decade ago; most lack citizenship and all rely on international aid for food and basic services. Cyclone Mocha, which hit Rakhine in May, wiping out several camps, underscored how vulnerable this population is. Naypyitaw said 117 Rohingya were killed, but other sources put the number higher. The regime subsequently blocked an aid delivery plan put forward by the UN, as well as a proposal to bring supplies across the border from Bangladesh.

The regime is now slowly moving forward with a plan to close some of the camps for the displaced, but like the talk of repatriation, this scheme appears to be a ploy to burnish its image by reducing the number of displaced people, including Rakhine Muslims. The lack of proper planning and care for the welfare of camp residents is obvious, as those who have been relocated thus far are languishing in shabby resettlement sites close to the old camps, where they have even less access to social support.

As for Rohingya living in Rakhine outside camps, their basic rights continue to be unprotected, and the combined effects of conflict, COVID-19, the coup and Cyclone Mocha have deepened their troubles. Many feel they are stuck between the Arakan Army and the military, which has threatened community leaders with arrest if they are found to be cooperating with the ethnic armed group's bureaucracy. A bright spot has been improved relations between Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine communities, thanks to the Arakan Army's emergence; very popular among the Rakhine, the group's leaders have emphasised that the majority Burmans, rather than Muslims, are the real enemy of the Rakhine people. The Arakan Army has also taken steps to include Rohingya in the lower levels of its bureaucracy and eased movement restrictions in areas it controls. Recent tensions between the Arakan Army and ARSA in northern Rakhine State threaten to undo some of this fragile progress, however, as fears of renewed Rohingya insurgency among ethnic Rakhine will likely fuel anti-Rohingya sentiment.

What the EU Can Do

First, as one of the world's largest humanitarian donors, the EU should increase its aid to Rohingya refugees through the UN humanitarian appeal. Brussels has generally maintained a consistent level of support for Rohingya appeals

over the past six years, and EU member states provide limited additional funding. In July, the EU released an additional €12.5 million to address humanitarian needs of people in Myanmar and Rohingya in Bangladesh. But

the dire – and rapidly worsening – situation in the camps is reason enough to increase funding further, particularly in the short term. With a strong presence in Bangladesh, including in Cox’s Bazar (the southern district where most camps are located), the EU should also work with other donors to stabilise overall funding for the refugees, and help ensure that the Rohingya’s basic needs – food, shelter, health and education – are met through the UN-led humanitarian response. In light of growing violence and insecurity, Brussels should also give more to aid organisations providing protection services, which are struggling to cope with rising insecurity in the camps, and to support alternative solutions for those most at risk.

EU member states, meanwhile, should follow the lead of actors such as the U.S. and Canada in committing to resettle some number of Rohingya refugees – especially from among the most vulnerable. Dhaka has recently permitted resettlement for the first time since 2010. (It was previously reluctant because it feared the availability of this option could become a pull factor encouraging more Rohingya to cross into Bangladesh.) Although third-country resettlement will help only a small proportion of refugees, it will be life-changing for those people, and the benefits may go further besides. It could also improve the climate for discussions with the Bangladeshi government by demonstrating Europe’s commitment to taking concrete measures of its own to alleviate the crisis.

Secondly, it is important for the EU to push the Bangladeshi government harder on the parameters it sets for the refugee response. Dhaka’s regulations prevent refugees from working legally, leaving them almost entirely dependent on international aid – an unsustainable situation given the precipitous falloff in assistance pledges. The EU, which Bangladeshis perceive as neutral in their domestic politics, and is a vital trade partner (accounting for almost 40 per cent of exports), should encourage Dhaka to loosen restrictions on Rohingya employment and movement, which would allow

humanitarian agencies to move beyond emergency relief.

As part of that effort, Brussels should make clear to Dhaka that it will mobilise funding for longer-term initiatives that would reduce Rohingya dependence on humanitarian aid, such as job opportunities and durable shelter. For example, the EU could make clear that, apart from providing funds itself, it will convene a donor conference to solicit pledges, as it did with the event it co-hosted in 2020 with the U.S., UK and UN High Commissioner for Refugees. That event raised \$600 million in new pledges for humanitarian programs. Before a new conference can take place, however, Dhaka will need to change its approach to the refugee crisis, accepting that the vast majority of the refugees will remain in Bangladesh for years to come.

Thirdly, the EU and member states should send a clear signal about repatriation. Given the crisis in Myanmar, the chances that Rohingya refugees can go home have only grown slimmer. While respecting the wishes of those refugees who may nonetheless want to return, the EU should make clear that it opposes the current pilot project given the military regime’s failure to ensure safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation.

Fourthly, the EU should also maintain its support to Rohingya in Rakhine State, who due to a combination of conflict and economic crisis have become even more reliant on international aid since the coup. It will be easier said than done. Since the coup, the military regime has tightened restrictions on humanitarian aid, including limiting the travel authorisations required for visiting Rakhine State, blocking visas for international staff and introducing a new Organisations Law that gives the junta greater control over aid groups.

For donors like the EU, these strictures only increase the urgency of shifting as much funding as possible to local partners including NGOs and community-based organisations, which can more easily navigate these restrictions. To work with these groups and ensure the safety of

their staff and beneficiaries, Brussels will likely need to relax its usual requirements on partner registration, banking and reporting. Close coordination with other actors, particularly the UN, will also be essential to ensure that funding is efficiently and usefully allocated. To enhance the effectiveness of the UN country team, the EU should push the UN leadership to appoint a permanent resident coordinator as soon as possible, filling the vacancy left when the last one departed in November 2021. The incoming official should have the skills and experience necessary to handle Myanmar's particular challenges.

Finally, the EU and member states should continue to support international accountability mechanisms that aim to hold to account

perpetrators of abuses, including conflict-related sexual violence, against the Rohingya in Myanmar during the 2016-2017 military crackdown. The primary such mechanisms are the International Criminal Court and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, a body the UN has tasked with gathering evidence for future criminal proceedings. Their efforts serve as a reminder to potential perpetrators that a cloud of criminal suspicion – and the prospect of prosecution – will follow those who choose to commit atrocities. ■