



**RESPONSES TO REFUGEE
CRISES IN ASIA**



**HARVARD UNIVERSITY
ASIA CENTER**

Harvard University Asia Center Responses to Refugee Crises in Asia

Refugee crises are affecting all regions of the world, and, whether caused by natural disasters or violent conflict, they have become one of the most widespread and urgent humanitarian issues of our time. Global displacement today has surpassed anything witnessed since the aftermath of World War II—the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimated in June 2017 that currently as many as 65.6 million people have been forcibly displaced. After fleeing, those who survive long enough to reach designated camps still face squalid conditions, and access to shelter, food, and sanitation facilities is severely limited. While generally intended to be temporary, refugee camps often endure for years, sometimes for generations.

Harvard offers a wealth of intellectual resources, regional experience, and local networks that can be mobilized to better understand and address the critical needs of refugees. In particular, the Asia Center has the capability to harness interdisciplinary expertise from across the university and support a variety of projects ranging from targeted research on the effects of displacement on children to larger-scale examinations of the politics and overall design of refugee camps themselves. As a starting point, we are focusing our work on one group of refugees in one region of Asia: the Rohingya of Myanmar and the refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh. Our longer-term goal is to be able to adapt the methods, research findings, and recommendations of this project to inform work with other groups of refugees in different regions of Asia.



65.6 MILLION

PEOPLE HAVE BEEN FORCIBLY DISPLACED

▲ 303,070

Rohingya in Bangladesh before 25 August 2017
(census results of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)

213,000 Rohingya assessed in Cox's Bazar before the August influx
(based on the Needs and Population Monitoring estimates)

➔ 671,000

New arrivals as of 15 February 2018 (NPM round 8)

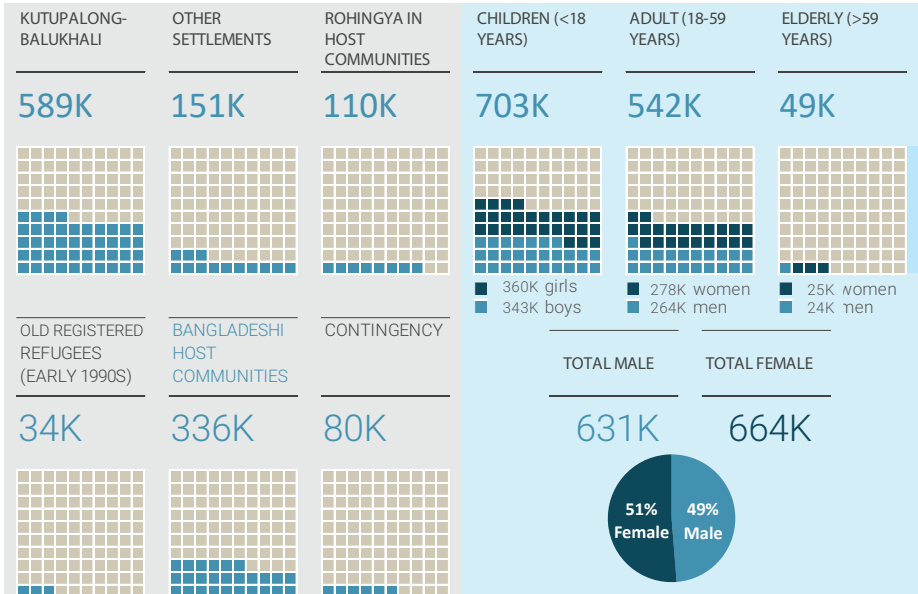
➔ 80,000

Contingency for addition influx

🏠 336,000

Bangladesh host communities

1.3M 



2018 UNOCHA Joint Response Plan for Rohingya.

THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

The Rohingya of Myanmar are one of the largest and fastest-growing refugee populations in the world. As a Muslim minority group, they have faced widespread, violent persecution. Not only are they an unrecognized ethnic group in Myanmar, the Rohingya are considered to be illegal migrants because of their Bangladeshi origins. Furthermore, they are frequently labeled as “terrorists” in the media and by other religious groups in Myanmar.

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have left their homes in Myanmar’s Rakhine state to escape religious persecution, riots, and forced labor, and between 2012 and 2016, approximately 250,000 were driven into internment camps or into exile. Refugees who have fled by boat to other Southeast Asian nations have frequently been denied entry, several countries having enforced a “push-back policy”—the practice of literally pushing boats filled with men, women, and children back into the ocean. Another 700,000 Rohingya fled the country after a brutal military crackdown in August 2017 that left entire villages burned to the ground and subjected innumerable survivors to horrific atrocities.



Approximately 800,000 to 1,000,000 Rohingya refugees who escaped the violence in Myanmar have made the trek north on foot to camps in neighboring Bangladesh. A 3,000-acre area was designated for refugees in October 2017, and seas of improvised settlements now sprawl across the desert landscape. In addition to facing a shortage of durable housing, the camps lie along a wildlife migration route inhabited by elephants, and human-animal encounters within the area have led to dozens of deadly attacks. The refugees' makeshift dwellings, constructed primarily out of bamboo, rope, and plastic sheeting, offer little protection, and with the upcoming seasonal monsoons, flooding and mudslides threaten to destroy many of the meager structures that currently exist.



800,000 TO 1,000,000

APPROXIMATELY 800,000 TO 1,000,000 ROHINGYA REFUGEES WHO ESCAPED THE VIOLENCE IN MYANMAR HAVE MADE THE TREK NORTH ON FOOT TO CAMPS IN NEIGHBORING BANGLADESH.





ALTERNATIVES TO REFUGEE CAMPS

According to UNHCR, refugees spend on average seventeen years in camps. Beyond the primary issues of survival and safety, the question of long-term versus short-term solutions for improving living conditions is itself rife with complex, political implications. The length of time people live in camps raises difficult questions for the host country, and even in the short term, already impoverished local communities, such as those in Bangladesh, can be overwhelmingly disrupted. It is clear that these camps, designed as temporary facilities, are not sustainable solutions to the refugee crisis.

Many people expect that refugees will return home after a natural disaster or at the suspension of conflict. However, in the case of the Rohingya, because they are not officially recognized as citizens in Myanmar, they are faced with the additional burden of being stateless. While considered to be of Bangladeshi origin, the overwhelming majority of Rohingya who were forced to flee had never lived outside their villages, let alone in Bangladesh. Although Myanmar government officials have recently claimed that the Rohingya may return, repatriation seems unlikely while the government of Myanmar condones the actions of the nation's military and discriminatory sentiments continue to prevail.

UNHCR's policy recommendations state that beyond basic survival, refugees have the right to reside in communities that allow independence, sustainable livelihoods, social cohesion, and spaces for community-based activities such as education and play. The conditions of the Rohingya in the Bangladesh camps have not yet been systematically documented, but there is no question that the current situation is far from meeting UNHCR's policies. It is clear that alternatives to refugee camps must be developed.

Creating viable alternatives to the camps will not be possible without conducting carefully-designed, multi-disciplinary assessments, negotiating shared goals, and creating trusted partnerships among national and local governments, local communities, and aid organizations, as well as with the refugees themselves.

ACCORDING TO UNHCR, REFUGEES SPEND ON
AVERAGE SEVENTEEN YEARS IN CAMPS.



17 YEARS

IT IS CLEAR THAT THESE CAMPS,
DESIGNED AS TEMPORARY FACILITIES,
ARE NOT SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS TO
THE REFUGEE CRISIS.

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE

Refugees who enter camps as children spend the formative years of their lives in extreme conditions with limited access to shelter, water, or food. In early childhood, exposure to such conditions without special support disrupts physical, cognitive, and emotional development. According to current estimates, approximately half of the Rohingya refugees in the Bangladesh camps are children. While global organizations like UNICEF and UNHCR provide significant essential services and supplies for basic subsistence, special attention to developmental issues is also crucial if the children are to have a future beyond immediate survival.

Education and play are basic human rights enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and without opportunities to engage in learning, a generation of children is at risk. Knowing that life in refugee camps can last for many years, it is critical that we address children's educational and developmental needs. Furthermore, understanding how education can counteract the effects of displacement and build resilience in children will not only help develop strategies for the Rohingya in Bangladesh, it will also inform work needed to assist refugees in other regions.

50%

**OF THE ROHINGYA REFUGEES
IN THE BANGLADESH CAMPS
ARE CHILDREN.**

ASIA CENTER COLLABORATIONS

Significant work co-funded by the Asia Center is already underway by colleagues from across the University, such as the research being conducted by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health on conflict, disasters, and displacement; the Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic's adjudication of human rights violations in Myanmar; the Harvard Graduate School of Education's work on refugee education that merges transnational practices, policy, and scholarship; and the Harvard Graduate School of Design's research on informal settlements and the design of safe play spaces for refugee children.

The Asia Center is in the process of creating new interdisciplinary collaborations to further this work. We are teaming up with colleagues to develop specific ways to address refugee crises, such as constructing and conducting in-depth analyses of host and refugee conditions; designing more secure, site-specific, and durable settlements; creating curricular models that engage children and adults; and identifying effective peacebuilding strategies.

With colleagues from across the university, we are organizing a workshop to be held in fall 2018 that will develop a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of displacement on children. The workshop will engage with a range of disciplines including the developmental, socio-emotional, cognitive, health, and physiological effects of displacement, as well as the use of education to build resilience.

Desired outcomes include focused research grants for faculty and students to do collaborative research on issues identified at the workshop.

A subgroup of colleagues who participate in the workshop will also be developing culturally-appropriate surveys to assess the current conditions in Rakhine state and will explore how bridges can be built among groups, how violence can be prevented, and how anti-Rohingya sentiments can be de-escalated through social media.

Another working group sponsored by the Asia Center will focus on the question of alternatives to camps and will look at a range of issues including the physical design of climate-appropriate settlements and the political implications that host countries must address.

Central leadership is needed to harness the range of expertise from across Harvard's schools. The Asia Center is poised to take on this role, and we look forward to the opportunity to address these challenges with dedicated partners.

EDUCATION AND PLAY ARE BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS ENSHRINED IN THE 1951 REFUGEE CONVENTION AND THE 1989 CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD. WITHOUT OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE IN LEARNING, A GENERATION OF CHILDREN IS AT RISK.



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