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LIVES IN LIMBO

NO END IN SIGHT TO THE THREATS
FACING ROHINGYA CHILDREN

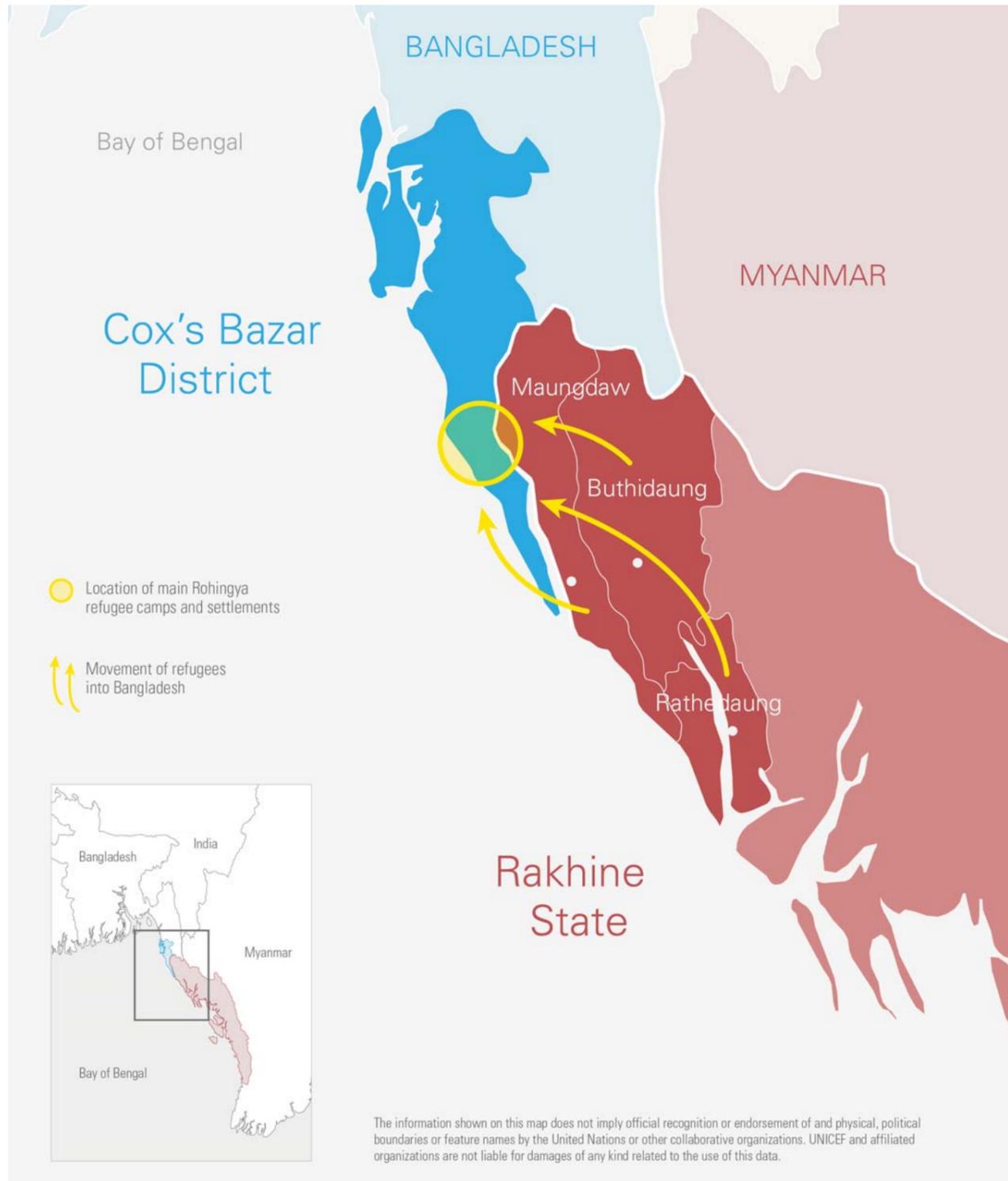
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Children at the Balukhali makeshift settlement.

SITUATION MAP



INTRODUCTION

When hundreds of thousands of terrified Rohingya refugees* began flooding onto the beaches and paddy-fields of southern Bangladesh six months ago, it was the children -- who made up nearly sixty per cent of their number -- that caught many people's attention.

The babies carried in the arms of siblings little older than themselves; the frightened toddlers clutching at the clothing of their exhausted parents; and the tiny graves of those who didn't survive the journey.

By any definition, this extraordinary exodus – quickly dubbed the world's fastest-growing humanitarian emergency – was a children's crisis. Yet the images only told part of the story.

Back in Myanmar, an estimated half million Rohingya remain largely sealed off in their communities and displacement camps, fearful that the violence and horror that had driven so many of their relatives and neighbours to flee would engulf them too.

Today, there are an estimated 720,000 Rohingya children in southern Bangladesh and Myanmar's Rakhine State, in dire need of humanitarian assistance and protection – and looking to the outside world for help.

In Bangladesh, aid efforts led and overseen by a Government – and local communities – who have been unstinting in their generosity have averted disaster. But with the cyclone season looming, urgent efforts – and funding – are necessary to shield the fragile refugee encampments from the forces of nature, and to preserve the services on which so many children depend.

In Myanmar, the scale of the challenge remains unclear. Only with unimpeded access to all parts of Rakhine State can UNICEF and other humanitarian partners meet the essential protection, health and other needs of the Rohingya who stayed behind. And without a permanent end to the violence, still more desperate refugees will continue to make their way towards Bangladesh.

But a lasting solution requires more: the recognition of the basic rights of the Rohingya population – ending the legislation, policies and practices that discriminate against them; and curbing the tensions between the different communities in Rakhine State.

Such was the wise recommendation of the Rakhine Advisory Commission headed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, when it submitted its report last year. The Commission called for urgent investment in schools, health services and other basic services in Rakhine State, one of Myanmar's poorest states that would benefit all communities living there.

It is also the means by which the necessary conditions can be established to allow the return of the Rohingya refugees to their former homes. A voluntary, safe and dignified return process cannot place children or their families in danger, nor force returning families into camps. Rohingya who return must have freedom of movement, and access to essential services.

For its part, the Government of Bangladesh can help secure the fundamental rights of Rohingya children by registering all those born in the country, and by granting refugee status to all Rohingya children and their families.

The United Nations and the rest of the humanitarian community will play their full part in all this. Alongside our partners, UNICEF is on the ground in both Myanmar and Bangladesh, delivering life-saving assistance including nutrition and health services, safe water and sanitation, protection services and support to education.

720,000 Rohingya children in Bangladesh and Myanmar are in dire need of assistance.

In Bangladesh, we've dug hundreds of water bore wells, and installed thousands of latrines. Some 900,000 adults and children have been vaccinated against cholera, and campaigns to protect children against diphtheria and measles have achieved strong results. Learning and child friendly spaces are offering traumatised children the chance to begin healing.

A great deal has been achieved since August 2017. But much, much more must be done to protect an outcast population, and tackle the complex roots of this crisis before its painful repercussions spread further still, and condemn a generation of Rohingya children to a perpetual life in limbo.

*The term "refugees" is used throughout this report to denote Rohingya who have fled Myanmar to Bangladesh. However, only a small proportion of those who arrived prior to August 2017 are formally recognized as refugees by Bangladesh.

ROHINGYA CHILDREN TRAPPED IN LIMBO AND DEPRIVED OF THEIR BASIC RIGHTS

“Where we live right now is not in Bangladesh, and not in Myanmar. It is Zero Point.”

Zero Point. It's a fitting name for the bleak, windswept patch of wasteland where 10 year-old Huzzatul Islam, his family and several thousand other Rohingya refugees find themselves stranded.

It sits on a narrow spit of sand edged by a brackish creek at the southernmost point of the long border dividing Myanmar and its neighbour, Bangladesh. It's a spot so remote few maps even mention it.

It is mid-January 2018, and this particular group of refugees has been stranded here for over four months. Their only protection from the elements are the flimsy plastic and wooden shacks they have erected for themselves beside the fetid waters of the creek.

Chased from their homes and communities, the Rohingya are trapped in limbo and deprived of their basic rights.

At some point, they will join the 688,000 Rohingya who have fled from Myanmar into Bangladesh in the six months since the latest bout of violence in Rakhine State erupted in late August 2017. But they have been barred from crossing the border, at least for now, even as others continue to join them, as the exodus from Myanmar goes on.

So the group – including many children besides Huzzatul – can do nothing but wait in Zero Point.

The only alternative would be turn back towards Myanmar and return home. But that's not a prospect they can contemplate.

“We fled because they were firing bullets at us,” says Huzzatul. “Every day we are scared because we hear that we may have to go back into Myanmar.”

The plight of the people stranded in Zero Point symbolises that of the Rohingya as a whole. Chased from their homes and communities, the Rohingya are a people trapped in limbo and deprived of their basic rights, and facing fresh threats to their health and lives.

Rohingya children on a bamboo bridge in the Kutupalong refugee camp.

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10 year-old Huzzatul Islam sits on a bridge leading to Zero Point where several thousand stranded Rohingya refugees wait to cross from Myanmar into Bangladesh.

A crisis of human rights within a humanitarian emergency

When the latest phase of the Rohingya tragedy came to global attention in August 2017, the crisis had all the hallmarks of a major humanitarian emergency: there were the frantic scenes of rain-drenched refugees streaming through the paddy-fields of southern Bangladesh, clutching their children and their meagre belongings; and then the frenzied efforts of local charities to keep them alive.

These were quickly reinforced by international NGOs and UN agencies (already on the ground since the previous refugee influx in October 2016) who now scaled up their operations into a much larger relief effort. Within weeks Bangladesh was host to one of the world's largest refugee camps.

Along with the epic scenes of human misery came horrifying accounts of what had triggered the Rohingyas' chaotic flight from Myanmar. Tales of savage violence and cruelty, of homes and communities razed to the ground, of children murdered in cold blood, and of women brutally raped. Independent confirmation of these accounts was hard to come by. But satellite images and the tell-tale smoke seen rising from many border villages left little room for doubt.

This was a crisis with deep roots, the outcome of decades of brutality and discrimination against the Rohingya community, during which the rights of a whole people had been trampled and denied.



Six year-old Yasin rests at a centre to register newly-arrived Rohingya refugees in Teknaf, southern Bangladesh. His father says soldiers came to their house in Myanmar and beat Yasin with their guns when he was unable to tell them his father's whereabouts.

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Beyond help inside Rakhine State: the children who stayed behind

The little girl's hair was short and dirty. Her white shirt was streaked with mud, as was her green school skirt. She had come to attend class at a temporary learning centre in the camp which is her home. And she carried her 6 month-old baby sister with her.

"I brought her with me because I have to look after her also," she explained, balancing the infant on her hip. "Coming to school is all I have to do, otherwise I have to do chores around the house."

A UNICEF staff member encountered the two children in December 2017 during a visit to one of the camps that hold Rohingya people displaced by previous bouts of violence in

Myanmar's Rakhine State, and who had remained behind when so many others had fled.

Access to northern parts of Rakhine State is tightly restricted but UN officials who the Government has allowed to travel to the region say they encountered frightened and isolated communities, deprived of health and other basic services.

UNICEF and its partners urgently need unimpeded access that allows them to reach all children across Rakhine state, regardless of their ethnicity. That access – combined with the necessary funding – would allow the scale up of the support to children we and our partners are providing already – the

21,000 children who receive protection services; the 10,320 children in temporary learning centres in central Rakhine; the 22,400 beneficiaries of health consultative services and the 29,000 IDPs (including nearly 12,000 children) who receive water and sanitation services in camps.

In central Rakhine, there are over 129,000 Rohingya living in bleak camps and displacement sites. Their freedom of movement is severely limited, largely preventing them from accessing health care, formal education and livelihoods, and leaving them dependent on humanitarian support.

Together with the 400,000 Rohingya children who have arrived in Bangladesh since August 2017, these children still in Rakhine state constitute a "lost generation", desperate for a better future, wanting to go home, but at the mercy of political and other forces.

"Some 720,000 Rohingya children are essentially trapped

– either hemmed in by violence and forced displacement inside Myanmar or stranded in overcrowded camps in Bangladesh because they can't return home," said Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF Director of Emergency Programmes.

"This is a crisis without a quick fix that could take years to resolve unless there is a concerted effort to address its root causes."

Discussions around the possible return of refugees from Bangladesh began in November 2017, after the signing of an agreement between the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments.

"This is a crisis without a quick fix that could take years to resolve unless there is a concerted effort to address its root causes."



Girls fetch water from a pond in Nget Chaung camp in central Rakhine, Myanmar.

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Significantly, the refugees themselves were not involved in the discussion, let alone the children among them.

With memories still fresh of the horrors they had witnessed – or were direct victims of – the children in the camps of Cox’s Bazar speak as one. Much as they yearn to recover their former lives, they are simply too terrified of what will happen to them if they go now.

“Last time they cut my head,” said one 17 year-old girl, still bearing the scars of a soldier’s rifle butt. “But if we go back they will cut out my heart, without asking any questions.”

Amid such fears, and in view of the current restrictions on access and movement in northern areas of Rakhine state, it has not been possible for the United Nations or the international community to ascertain that the conditions for the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of refugees exist.

In Bangladesh, aid efforts avert catastrophe but new dangers loom

The Rohingya refugees in southern Bangladesh are still trying to recover from the psychological effects of the violence that drove them from their homes, while adapting to the harshness of life in the cramped and insanitary encampments that have sprung up to accommodate them.

Having arrived virtually empty-handed, the families depend on handouts of water, food and other basic assistance. The same goes for those taken in by long-suffering local host communities. They are also at risk of serious illness or death: respiratory and waterborne diseases are the main risks, but an ongoing diphtheria outbreak has disproportionately affected children below the age of fifteen who make up



A mother holds her young daughter outside their plastic-and-bamboo hut in the Balukhali refugee camp in southern Bangladesh.

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75% of cases. Over 14,000 children have been admitted to UNICEF-supported treatment centres suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition.

Amid incredibly difficult circumstances, the Bangladesh authorities deserve enormous credit for all they have done to help these desperate people. Under the government’s leadership, national and international aid bodies have averted the worst consequences of this human calamity – for now at least.

UNICEF has played a full part in the response to date, digging hundreds of water bore wells, and installing thousands of latrines. Alongside other partners, it has helped the Government immunize 900,000 children and adults against cholera, and screened nearly 263,000 children for malnutrition. Learning and recreational spaces for children have been expanded rapidly, but still fall well short of the needs. Over 262,000 children are currently deprived of an education.

“We know that a lot of people live in areas which will be entirely flooded.”

Huge challenges remain. The fragile camps – built on sandy soil and steep slopes – must be urgently reinforced to avoid being swept away in the coming cyclone season. Meanwhile, vulnerable children – and girls in particular – are prey to traffickers and other abuses.

Decongestion of the camps is essential to ensure basic facilities reach all inhabitants. Currently, 100 people must use a single latrine. An outbreak of cholera or acute watery diarrhoea could kill thousands.

“Looking forward we have the rains coming soon, and we have a lot of preparation to do,” says UNICEF chief of Cox’s Bazar field office, Viviane Van Steirteghem. “We know that a lot of people live in areas which will be entirely flooded. Also a number of our services are in those areas, so we can already expect that access to health, to education, and to child protection services, will be considerably diminished, and even access to clean water, and sanitation.”

The specific rights of newborns are another important challenge: currently any child born in Bangladesh is provided with a birth certificate. But this does not confer



The steep terrain on which many of the camps are built will increase the risk of landslides when the rains come.

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any entitlement to citizenship. Finding a solution to the statelessness of Rohingya children is a critical issue to be addressed.

While the Rohingya refugees wait to learn their fate, a generation of children are losing valuable time. Until the conditions are in place in Myanmar that would allow them to return home as citizens, with their rights and dignity intact, they are stuck in Bangladesh – no-one knows for how long.

The international community must plan for a long-term stay, and provide Bangladesh with the necessary financial and other resources to be able to deal with the crisis that the refugees’ arrival – joining those from previous influxes – has created. At the same time, it must demand the Government of Myanmar create the conditions that will respect the rights of the Rohingya and allow their prompt and safe return – not to IDP camps – but to their own homes.

A CALL TO ACTION for all Rohingya children

Everything possible must be done to safeguard the rights of all children affected by this crisis – an obligation both Myanmar and Bangladesh accepted when they ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

By restoring and guaranteeing rights, starting with investment in education, it is possible to turn this crisis into a story of hope for children and the future. The current crisis must be a turning point for coordinated action to address the longstanding violence and discrimination against Rohingya people, to restore and guarantee their rights and help them rebuild their lives. Rohingya children must not be left to languish in hopeless limbo. This is an investment in hope for every child and a better future for the region.

Rohingya refugee children make the long journey into Bangladesh



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Muhammad Shafiq, 2, was severely burned when his family's home in Myanmar was set on fire.

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UNICEF calls on the Government of Bangladesh to provide:

- Additional land to allow for decongesting the camps in southern Bangladesh, to ensure adequate access to water, sanitation, health and other services;
- Support to the expansion of multi-lingual education for all children in the camps;
- Birth registration for all Rohingya children born in Bangladesh;
- Refugee status for all Rohingya children and their families.

UNICEF calls on the Government of Myanmar to:

- Stop the violence, including the killing of children;
- Provide protection for Rohingya children and those of all other ethnic groups;
- Allow unrestricted access for humanitarian organisations to all areas of Rakhine state;
- Provide improved conditions for all persons in need of humanitarian and long-term development support in Rakhine, in line with the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission.
- Create appropriate conditions on the ground that would allow the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees to their former communities. Rohingya families themselves must be closely consulted on any decisions regarding their futures.

UNICEF calls on the international community to:

- To fully fund all life-saving humanitarian assistance for Rohingya children and families in Bangladesh and Myanmar, and especially to urgently support scaled up activities to mitigate the risks of the upcoming cyclone and monsoon season.
- To invest in supporting quality education for all Rohingya children, to ensure that they do not lose educational opportunities while longer-term solutions to this crisis are being developed.
- To support UNICEF's and our partners' call for unrestricted humanitarian access across Rakhine State in Myanmar to reach all Rohingya children and families.
- To stay the course in supporting Rohingya children and families, in working with the governments and civil society of Bangladesh and Myanmar so that longer term solutions to this crisis are based on respect for and protection of the human rights of all Rohingya people.

UNICEF reiterates its readiness to support the realization of these critically-important goals, working in partnership with both Governments towards the achievement of our common goals for children, women, and all vulnerable groups regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or status.

SIX MONTHS ON MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS



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https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5_6159



Daily chores that put Rohingya refugee children in danger

A dawn mist still cloaks the refugee camps when 12 year old Nurbahar and her friend, Sabiha, who is a year younger, set off towards the forest. The pair have a school day in one of the camp's learning centres ahead of them. But first, there is work to do.

"We have known each other since we were kids, in Myanmar," says Sabiha. "And now we go to school and we go to the jungle together."

The girls walk briskly down the path leading out of the camp, each holding a crude machete which they will use to cut firewood – a commodity in great demand among the vast refugee population. With adjacent forest areas now increasingly stripped of vegetation, that can involve a walk of up to two hours.

"I don't like to go to the jungle," says Sabiha. "But we cannot cook without taking firewood."

Their anxiety is understandable. The route they take towards the nearest forested hillside takes the girls through several local villages, where attitudes towards the refugees are not always sympathetic.

"The villagers can take our wood and beat us, so we are afraid of them and we never go alone," says Sabiha glancing at her friend.

In the crowded and largely lawless world of the camps, children face a wide variety of dangers. Parents say they try to keep their children close, to prevent them getting in harm's way. Women and girls especially report sexual harassment while collecting firewood.

But children like Sabiha and Nurbahar are expected to help out with chores – whether fetching water or firewood, or waiting in line for relief handouts. As time goes on, and poverty bites deeper, children are increasingly being pushed to contribute to the family income.

Child protection specialists say warning signs are already there – including a drop in the number of girls attending school – which may indicate a fear on the part of parents that their daughters are not safe wandering the camp alone.

"As financial pressure grows on families, we are starting to see other negative coping mechanisms coming to the fore," says UNICEF's Carina Hickling, who specializes in gender based violence (GBV) in emergency situations.



Sabiha takes a break from chopping kindling for her family. This daily chore obliges her to walk to a jungle area up to two hours distant from her home in Balukhali makeshift settlement.

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"One is the practice of child marriage, where girls as young as 12 are pushed to marry, because that means there is one less mouth to feed. Another is child trafficking, possibly for commercial sexual exploitation."

In the crowded and largely lawless world of the camps, children face a wide variety of dangers.

The fact that trafficking in humans (as well as in drugs) were reported in Cox's Bazar long before the refugee influx only reinforces the concern.

Other issues are emerging in the camps as well, many related to the terrible violence the refugees witnessed inside Myanmar and on their journey to Bangladesh, and to the harsh circumstances they now find themselves in.