

How access to food for survivors of genocide is first step to dignity



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PERSPECTIVE

The swelter of record-high heat scorches the earth in the Cox Bazaar refugee camp. There is barely a gust of wind, no air conditioning or refrigerators to keep the people and the limited food they have cold. But here, in the largest refugee camp in the world, for the Rohingya people life continues despite deteriorating security. Bangladesh has been facing intensifying pressure to accept more Rohingya Muslims fleeing the war in neighboring Myanmar, a burden the government in Dhaka insists it cannot handle.

Rumata is one of the women who survived the genocide in Myanmar. Today she sews in a World Food Program recycling center, breathing new life into what is effectively trash. Nutritious biscuit wrappers that helped feed malnourished children are now meticulously upcycled and transformed into satchels, hats, and other useful keepsakes that will be sold. More importantly, the women and men who work here now have a sense of economic agency. Rumata says the money she earns here will help her only surviving child have a chance at a better life.

"My family was burned alive in Myanmar," Rumata tells us, her eyes well with tears as she continues to sew; it's a stark contrast. A semblance of normalcy; a woman who works juxtaposed with her recounting the horror of her past. "My village was where the genocide began. Before the massacre, there were shootings between Buddhists and the Myanmar army. Suddenly, the army started burning our homes. Within one day, nearly everyone was killed."

She explains that the women and children in her village were able to save themselves by running away and hiding in the woods. Many of the women here share similar stories of lived atrocities, fleeing brutality that was driven by an extremist ideology that pillaged the Rohingya people and their homeland in Myanmar. They talk to each other recounting what they lived seven years ago, at the start of the genocide.

"At first, we saw the men fighting each other. We women were able to get away. Women who saw the fighting grabbed their children and ran away. But then the rapes began, and after the rapes, many women were also killed," says Rumata. Those who were able to survive and escape from being burned alive as their homes were turned to ash, crossed the border and became refugees in Myanmar. These are the survivors of a genocide.

"We are lucky," says Rumata who witnessed a level of violence few will ever have to live through. The majority of the refugees who I spoke to when asked how their life is now, seven years from the start would say, "We have enough to survive." Survival almost seems to be enough, for now.

Under the scarves of many of the women, the literal scars from the atrocities lived still mark their bodies.

Mumtaz Begum is another Rohingya

woman who lives in the camp. She lifts her sari and shows us the burns all over her body and face. These are the scars of the genocide she survived. She has let us inside her humble home within the camp, "The abuse I survived has not gone away. The cuts and burns that are all over my body, I still feel them every day," she says. She cries as she recounts what she lived. "My children and husband were murdered and thrown into the fire," Mumtaz tells us. She and her daughter are the only survivors in her family who were able to escape to Bangladesh.

Outside of her home, children sing songs, unaware of what brought them here. Some of them were born within the very camp, not knowing anything else. Mumtaz covers her face when she walks outside in the Main Street of the camp, for her protection and safety.

Recently, a Human Rights Watch report claimed that the same forces that are supposed to protect the refugees have abused numerous of the Rohingya refugees within the camp.

Another woman, Fatima, within the World Food Program facility, says that here she feels safe, but walking outside in the camp, essentially moving from her small home to come to work, she fears for her safety. "I am worried about kidnappings," Fatima says as she cleans the fortified biscuit wrappers.

Armed groups in the camps have been increasingly kidnapping Rohingya refugees for ransom, forced recruitment, or human trafficking. Human Rights Watch documented 10 cases of abduction.

Today, nearly one million Rohingya live in the largest refugee camp in Bangladesh, some for the past seven years. But the idea of going back seems impossible today and leaves these people in limbo. In March 2022, in a speech delivered by Anthony Blinken, the United States' position on the oppression of Rohingya in Myanmar was declared a genocide after authorities confirmed accounts of mass murder and abuse against civilians by Myanmar's military in a widespread and systematic campaign against the ethnic minority.

Although the camps offer a glimmer of a semblance of normal life, vulnerabilities are increasingly being highlighted by disasters such as fire, cyclones, and storm damage. According to the Global Climate Risk Index, Bangladesh is the seventh most extreme disaster risk-prone country in the world.

Bangladesh has experienced sustained economic growth in recent years — one of the fastest in Asia before the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, 40 million people remain food insecure, and 11 million suffer from acute hunger. The country's low elevation and vast watercourses leave it susceptible to climate shocks. Compound that with the influx of Rohingya refugees that have come to the border from Myanmar, and food insecurity becomes even more pressing. This also adds to the frustration felt by some locals and leaders of the influx that seems to have no end in sight.

Bengalese farmer about how business is going for him, how he feels about the Rohingya camp being so close, and if it impacts his farming work.

"Honestly, the Rohingya people work harder than us," he says with a laugh. "We need them here. They are willing to work the land, and demand here has been increasing. It's a good thing," he says.

Kotigabegon is a female Bengalese farmer working the land in the Cox Bazaar. She proudly shows me her green chilis, pumpkins, gourds, and okra that she has grown. Becoming a farmer during the pandemic saved her family. "Previously,



A customer inspects gourds in a local market in Bangladesh that mainly the refugee Rohingya Muslims run.
● CRISTIANO MINICHELLO/USUN



Rohingya people watch as a massive fire rages through their cramped refugee camp in southern Bangladesh on March 5, 2023.
● RO MAUNG HLA MYINT ARAFAT/AL JAZEERA

Aid is often sent for the Rohingya, who are refugees from Myanmar being hosted in Bangladesh and not the Bengalese who are also suffering. According to the UNDP, around 20 percent of the population in Bangladesh was below the poverty line before 2020. A figure that has increased and is becoming a phenomenon that is remaining stagnant. This has been measured by the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which captures derivations in non-monetary dimensions of well-being, utilizing a range of indicators in calculating poverty levels for a particular population.

But out in the countryside just a few kilometers from the refugee camp, the rhythm is slower, and life is completely reliant on agriculture. I spoke with a

we had to go to the market, but, as women, we can't go alone. Now, we have the aggregation center where we can sell our products and we don't have to pay a tax. This has made things much better." The World Food Program implemented a small center where local farmers could sell to the local community. The women say they feel safe here and they can keep all the profits. "My family is proud. Previously, we were really struggling."

Here, we are just a few kilometers from the Rohingya refugee camp. The refugees who fled the genocide in Myanmar are not legally allowed to leave the camp, but often, they do anyway by paying off guards to make extra money. A sign that relying only on the 10\$ per month from the WFP for food per person is not enough. Last

year, the stipend was \$12 per month, but because of donor fatigue amidst the increased war and crisis, funds had to be cut. American Ambassador to the UN Agencies in Rome, Jeffrey Prescott, spoke to me there on the 30 million in aid that the US government will be sending to Bangladesh. "The US is the largest donor for this response. The primary driver for this trip was to find a way to focus attention on the scale of this crisis as we near seven years from the start," he said.

"The aid is a slice of dignity that we can provide to people. Any additional dignity is important and hard to measure."

With over 110 wars currently happening and donor fatigue following the start of the most pressing wars and crises in the world like those in Ukraine and Gaza, allocating funds to wars and genocides years after the breaking news headlines becomes difficult. "There is a lot of policy debate on how resources can be best used. We have excess commodities. American farmers are growing so many good healthy products. Part of the idea of addressing hunger is that it is not distributed well to people who are in need. Of course, a lot of foods don't travel well. So, it's key to creating an ecosystem of local sourcing," says Prescott.

"Local production sourcing is a way we can do that, and build on the small projects. The World Food Program has to get food to people urgently."

"We have tried to find ways when the host community and refugee population certainly have a dynamic there. We have to be sensitive to them to attune. That's not always something the humanitarian community has gotten right: Recognizing how we have to pair economic development efforts with the humanitarian response, especially when these operations are going to extend beyond the crisis."

"The international community has to be prepared for spillover effects from Burma. As always, the humanitarian community is prepared to respond, but I suspect that this situation will face a humanitarian crisis."

Domenico Scalpelli is a World Food Program representative for Bangladesh who previously worked in Myanmar in his thirty years of working with the organization. "There are more Rohingya in Bangladesh than in the original country of Myanmar today. The Rohingya is a population that is missing everything. A bit like [some] Palestinians, they don't have an identity. They can't identify themselves as Rohingya. They have to say they are Bengali. That's what the Bangladesh government wants. They don't have many rights. No right to move freely. They don't have citizenship, and they don't have birth certificates. Many rights that we take for granted. It's a real tragedy."

"We can discuss terminology, but what is happening is a tragedy. Whether it is called genocide or ethnic cleansing, when a million people have to move from their country of origin, without rights, without identity, call it whatever, but the reality is that there are many trials in the international court in the Hague. These are cases that will last for many years. Global justice is important."

In the midst of what seems like endless tragedy and injustice for a group of people simply because of being a member of the Rohingya from Myanmar, there is an undeniable sense of resilience and hope among these people. And it can be seen brightest among their children. Behind the fence where the children are forced to live, they answer me as I ask what their dream is. "To be a pilot," says one boy. "A teacher," says a girl. Smiling, they declare their dreams in the perfect English that they have learned in their classrooms within the refugee camp; A semblance of normalcy.

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