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Three Years On: Rohingya Need Sustainable Solutions

Three years since violent attacks in Myanmar forced more than 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh, the refugee population in Cox's Bazar District continues to wait for safe, dignified, and voluntary return to their homeland while living in conditions of deprivation and uncertainty.

The escalation of conflict between the Myanmar Armed Forces and the Arakan Army since December 2018 has impacted all communities in Rakhine State, including the Rohingya. The ongoing conflict has displaced more than 100,000 Rakhine (Arakanese) and other ethnic groups, resulting in the killing and maiming of civilians, and damage to critical infrastructure. A ceasefire that includes all parties to the conflict is urgently needed to support the protection of all communities in Rakhine State.

Despite the Government of Myanmar's commitment to meaningful community consultation prior to the internally displaced person (IDP) camp closures, reports indicate continued construction of permanent housing without any changes to existing movement restrictions. IDPs are thus denied the right to choose where they wish to relocate or return, thereby increasing the risk of prolonged encampment and permanent segregation of displaced communities. Equal rights and assurance that all communities in Rakhine State can live in safety, enjoy equal access to citizenship and basic services, and pursue livelihoods are yet to be guaranteed. Moreover, impunity for mass atrocities committed since 2016 continues.

The long-term solution to this humanitarian crisis rests with Myanmar. While Rohingya refugees have consistently expressed their desire to return home, the Government of Myanmar has yet to demonstrate the creation of conducive conditions for their safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable return—ensuring justice and accountability.

The recent emergence of COVID-19 cases in Rakhine State is of urgent concern. Every measure must be employed to protect all communities, and to support frontline workers to fight this pandemic. In Bangladesh, more than 860,000 Rohingya refugees living in 34 congested camps remain at risk of COVID-19 infection. The humanitarian community is working to expand multi-sectoral health and hygiene support for the Rohingya and local communities, with the vital support of Bangladeshi frontline workers, Rohingya youth, women, and religious leaders. A reduced humanitarian footprint, initially put in place with the hope of combating the spread of COVID-19, has limited refugees' access to the full range of services since April. Sadly, this has led to a secondary impact of the pandemic; Rohingya refugees struggle to access urgent protection services and have lost access to livelihoods and education.

Moreover, since May, more than 300 Rohingya refugees rescued from boats, including women and children are confined on Bhashan Char, a poorly equipped, flood prone, remote island located off the coast of Bangladesh.

We welcome the Government of Bangladesh's recent lifting of internet and communication restrictions on refugees and host community in Cox's Bazar District. We urge the government to keep the internet curtailments lifted. In many parts of Rakhine State, the Rohingya and others are blocked access to telecommunications, restricting their ability to obtain urgent, accurate, life-saving information, and from contacting their families and friends. These restrictions also obstruct humanitarian and government actors from effectively delivering risk messages and critical services remotely, particularly in the COVID-19 context, when their access to affected communities is limited due to public health reasons.

It is critical to maintain a sense of hope and stability amongst Rohingya and strengthen their linkages with local communities to fight the health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and beyond. To achieve this, it is important to prioritise Rohingya views and voices, acknowledging their centrality in the humanitarian response as first responders, decision-makers, and leaders in regard to their own community's future and well-being.

In recent months, Rohingya refugees have been denied safe asylum and many have died at sea or remain stranded afloat as boats were pushed back by countries in the region. COVID-19 is no excuse for governments to implement policies and practices that discriminate and stigmatise vulnerable groups, such as refugees, and contravene their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. Pushing refugees and survivors of human trafficking back to sea is a violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*, exposing Rohingya to potential persecution and/or death at sea.

Three years since the onset of the most severe attacks on Rohingya in Myanmar's history, the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) urge:

- The international community to continue their support for Rohingya within and outside of Myanmar and expand their search for durable and peaceful solutions. Efforts must be redoubled to encourage Myanmar to create the conditions necessary for the safe and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees through concrete actions such as lifting restrictions of movement across Rakhine State, providing alternative solutions for internally displaced people living in camps, providing access to full citizenship and amending the 1982 Citizenship Law, pursuing the peaceful end of the conflict in Rakhine State, and demonstrating a commitment to international justice and accountability.
- Donor governments must renew their pledge to enable regional governments to host Rohingya in their countries, uphold their fundamental rights, and ensure their safety, dignity and well-being.
- Governments in the region to undertake a comprehensive refugee response at the regional level while there is little prospect for voluntary, safe, and dignified returns to Myanmar in the short and medium term. Governments need to take a coordinated approach to save lives and fulfil their obligations to protect and assist refugees, through search and rescue operations, safe disembarkation, uninterrupted access to humanitarian services, and family reunification as soon as possible. States in the region should urgently agree on collective solutions and better responsibility sharing arrangements for hosting refugees.
- The Government of Myanmar to immediately re-establish telecommunications channels where they have been cut off or restricted and ensure that affected communities can access life-saving

information related to COVID-19 and enable humanitarian efforts to save lives and protect vulnerable communities.

- The Government of Bangladesh to allow more than 300 Rohingya refugees on Bhashan Char island to return to the Cox's Bazar camps and cease plans to transfer additional refugees from mainland camps to the island.

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) is a network of over 430 civil society organisations and individuals from 29 countries committed to advancing the rights of refugees in the Asia Pacific region. APRRN aims to advance the rights of refugees and other people in need of protection through joint advocacy, capacity strengthening, resource sharing, and outreach.

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