



# Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Turf wars among armed groups and dwindling aid have worsened dire conditions in refugee camps in Bangladesh, home to almost one million Rohingya since 2017. Dhaka and Naypyitaw are pushing for repatriation to Myanmar, but large-scale returns are unrealistic given insecurity and the absence of citizenship and other protections.

**Why does it matter?** Pressing for repatriation, Dhaka restricts refugees' freedom of movement and ability to work in Bangladesh. Constraints on aid organisations also push up the cost of delivering humanitarian assistance. Refugees are taking drastic measures – from joining criminal gangs to attempting dangerous migration – simply to survive.

**What should be done?** Foreign governments can bring immediate relief to Rohingya refugees by upping their support for the humanitarian response. Meanwhile, given the likelihood of a protracted crisis, Dhaka should adjust its policies to increase aid efficiency and refugee self-reliance with support from donors. It should also overhaul the policing of camps.

## *Executive Summary*

Six years after most of them fled Myanmar's Rakhine State, the almost one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are no closer to returning home. While the 2021 coup in Myanmar has further dimmed prospects for large-scale repatriation, security and economic conditions are deteriorating in the overcrowded refugee camps. Local authorities have failed to keep the Rohingya safe from armed groups and criminal gangs fighting for control of the camps. International aid is declining, due to competing priorities and financial constraints, but the Bangladeshi government makes matters worse by restricting the refugees' ability to earn an income. Donors should urgently increase humanitarian assistance closer to its previous level and work with the government to alter its policies so that more refugees have opportunities to support themselves. Bangladesh should also reform the way camps are policed, in part to allow greater civilian Rohingya leadership.

Over the past twelve months, turf wars among rival armed groups have bedevilled the sprawling refugee camps located in Bangladesh's southern Cox's Bazar district. Fighting between the once-dominant Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and groups such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) has left scores of refugees dead, while the number of abductions – in which armed groups or criminal gangs hold refugees for ransom – has increased nearly fourfold in 2023. While violence earlier occurred only at night, militants wielding knives and locally made guns now roam the camps during the day, threatening residents and killing rivals. Bangladesh's Armed Police Battalion, which has been responsible for camp security since July 2020, not only lacks the resources to protect refugees, but also appears to be complicit in their troubles: its members are accused of extorting, kidnapping and even torturing Rohingya, who have almost no recourse.

Meanwhile, international support for the Rohingya humanitarian response is dwindling. In 2022, the UN's humanitarian appeal was only 63 per cent funded, and pledges have dropped even more sharply in 2023 to date. As a result, humanitarian organisations have had to scale back vital services; most significantly, the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has been forced to cut food rations twice, reducing them from \$12 to \$8 per person per month, or a meagre 27 cents per day. The cuts are devastating because most refugees are heavily dependent on aid; government restrictions designed to prevent Rohingya from integrating into Bangladesh mean that finding legal employment is exceedingly difficult. Rising food prices in the aftermath of Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine have further exacerbated the problem. There are already indications that the aid cuts are having a range of deleterious effects, from rising malnutrition rates among children to more cases of intimate partner violence.

In early 2023, following two failed attempts at repatriation in 2018 and 2019, Naypyitaw and Dhaka pushed ahead with a pilot project that would see more than 1,000 refugees return in a first phase. Both sides – along with China, which is playing a mediating role – are keen to make progress, albeit for different reasons: Myanmar's military regime believes that returns will help its defence at the International Court of Justice against allegations of genocide in 2017, while Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government hopes that they will play in its favour in the

general election scheduled for January 2024. The repatriation attempt is unlikely to succeed, however. Refugees are sceptical of Naypyitaw's assurances of their safety and wary of its refusal to grant them automatic citizenship. They have good reason to be cautious: conditions in Myanmar have got worse since the 2021 coup, and in November fresh fighting broke out in Rakhine State between the military and Arakan Army, one of the country's most powerful ethnic armed groups, making safe, dignified and voluntary return all but impossible.

These three issues – rising insecurity, declining aid and stalled repatriation – are closely intertwined, creating a crisis that threatens to spiral out of control. The Bangladeshi government's restrictions have deepened refugees' reliance on assistance and added to the cost of the humanitarian response. Dhaka's policy is also at odds with a reality in which tens of thousands of refugees are already working informally in cities surrounding the camps, where they are regularly subjected to exploitation due to their illegal status and forced to pay bribes to security officials.

Growing poverty and hopelessness in the camps – fuelled by the lack of near-term prospects of return to Myanmar – have compelled many Rohingya to make difficult decisions, ranging from young men joining armed groups or criminal gangs for pay to families resorting to early marriage of adolescent girls in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed. Thousands of desperate refugees have also undertaken risky journeys in the hope of reaching Malaysia, while an unknown number have quietly returned to Rakhine State despite the dangers or disappeared into other regions in Bangladesh despite rules that normally forbid them to leave the camps.

Bangladesh, in partnership with international actors, needs to break this vicious cycle. It should lay the foundations for a sustainable response that acknowledges the protracted nature of the crisis, even while it continues pressing the Myanmar authorities to create suitable conditions for repatriation. Donors have a crucial role to play in supporting initiatives that build self-reliance and minimise aid dependence, but they can do so only if Dhaka rethinks its policies, permitting activities beyond emergency relief. In the interim, they should bring humanitarian funding back to a level that lets refugees live in dignity, starting with ensuring that they have enough to eat. To address rising insecurity, Bangladesh also needs to overhaul the way it polices the camps, allow greater civilian leadership among the refugee population and take stronger action against criminals who are exploiting the refugee crisis for personal gain.

**Cox's Bazar/Dhaka/Brussels, 6 December 2023**

# Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

## I. Introduction

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The Rohingya refugee crisis drags on, with no end in sight.<sup>1</sup> In August 2017, Myanmar's military launched a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine State, after the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) had attacked police outposts and a military base. In just a few weeks, around 750,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, after the country's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, agreed to provide sanctuary to the Muslim minority. (Smaller numbers had already left Rakhine in 2016.)<sup>2</sup> It was the third major exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh. Earlier waves followed military assaults on the group in 1978 and 1991-1992. This time, however, most Rohingya have not returned to Rakhine State. Instead, they are demanding that the military address what they consider to be the ultimate cause of their plight: Myanmar's reluctance to grant them citizenship. Without citizenship, the Rohingya are denied basic rights in Myanmar, including freedom of movement, the right to run a business or own land, and access to such services as health care and education.

The mass expulsion of Rohingya in 2016-2017 horrified the world, but the refugees' plight has drawn less and less attention as time goes on. They remain packed into camps in the Cox's Bazar district in southern Bangladesh, which is one of the most sparsely populated areas of the country. Rohingya refugees outnumber local Bangladeshis almost two to one. Most of their camps are contiguous, clustered in an area known as Kutupalong, and together they make up the largest refugee settlement in the world, housing around 800,000 people.<sup>3</sup> The Rohingya in the camps are sustained through an expensive aid operation jointly led by the UN and the government.

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the Rohingya situation, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°303, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 27 December 2019; N°296, *The Long Haul Ahead for Myanmar's Rohingya Refugee Crisis*, 16 May 2018; N°292, *Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase*, 7 December 2017; N°283, *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, 15 December 2016; N°261, *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, 22 October 2014; and N°251, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence Against Muslims in Myanmar*, 1 October 2013; and Asia Briefings N°155, *Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, 25 April 2019; and N°153, *Bangladesh-Myanmar: The Danger of Forced Rohingya Repatriation*, 12 November 2018. See also Thomas Kean, "Five Years On, Rohingya Refugees Face Dire Conditions and a Long Road Ahead", Crisis Group Commentary, 22 August 2022; and Richard Horsey, "Will Rohingya Refugees Start Returning to Myanmar in 2018?", Crisis Group Commentary, 22 December 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The earlier group fled to Bangladesh in similar circumstances after ARSA carried out attacks in October 2016 and the military responded with a counter-insurgency campaign. Both cohorts are counted as part of the refugee population, which the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) says now numbers more than 960,000.

<sup>3</sup> "There is no hope: Death and desperation take over the world's largest refugee camp", *Time*, 26 September 2023.

Dozens of international NGOs and local groups are also involved. Over the past six years, the camps have become much more organised and, by all outward appearances, liveable thanks to donor-funded investments in basic infrastructure, including roads, water and sanitation facilities, and schools and clinics. Many of the trees that were cut down to make way for shelters and to provide fuel for cooking have regrown.

But appearances are deceiving. Over the same period, living conditions for the refugees have declined dramatically, confronting them with an untenable choice between remaining in a state of growing immiseration and going home to the same insecurity that forced them to leave in 2016-2017. Bangladesh continues to advocate strongly for repatriation, eager to shed the burdens of hosting this population. For the most part, Dhaka resists policy changes that might make it more attractive for refugees to stay put.

This report examines the worsening plight of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It also explains how the deteriorating security situation and the absence of protective safeguards means that large-scale repatriation is unlikely to proceed. Finally, it proposes ways for the Bangladeshi government and international actors to improve the refugee response, in light of the dynamics described above. The report is based on research in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar in June and October 2023, as well as interviews conducted remotely over a period of six months. Interviewees included UN and NGO officials, donors and diplomats, Bangladeshi and Myanmar government officials, independent experts and dozens of Rohingya refugees living in the Cox's Bazar area. About 60 per cent of interviewees identified as men, and 40 per cent as women. It builds upon earlier Crisis Group reports and briefings published since the Rohingya's mass flight in 2016-2017, as well as years of fieldwork on conflict dynamics in Myanmar.

## II. A Security Breakdown

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Security in and around the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar has worsened significantly in recent years. The main reason is that armed and criminal groups have firmed up a foothold inside the camps, something that Bangladeshi law enforcement has failed to stop. Violence has escalated especially rapidly over the past year, with up to a dozen different groups now engaged in turf wars and criminal activity, leading to a steep rise in killings and abductions. For most outfits, the primary goal is to gain a cut of the profits from the lucrative trade in methamphetamine tablets known as *yaba*, which arrive in large quantities from Myanmar, mainly across the Naf River, before traffickers carry the drugs further into Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> But these groups also make money in other illicit ways, including kidnapping, extortion and people smuggling.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2017 influx of refugees, armed groups such as ARSA maintained a low profile in the camps. By early 2019, however, ARSA had come to pose a clear and growing threat to the refugees' safety.<sup>5</sup> Although the Bangladeshi government officially denied the group had any fighters in the country, the security forces appeared to tolerate ARSA's presence during this period. Some refugees also supported the group at first because they believed in its supposed political goal of creating an autonomous Rohingya region in Rakhine.<sup>6</sup>

Lacking any meaningful check on its activities, ARSA quickly established itself as the dominant actor in the camps. It set up an administrative system and started taxing refugees. It also worked to intimidate Rohingya who spoke out against its practices, including its involvement in the drug trade; Crisis Group interviewed numerous refugees whom the group has strong-armed.<sup>7</sup> "ARSA started to behave violently from 2018", said one. "They targeted educated people because they were the ones opposing their activities".<sup>8</sup> ARSA also went after women who worked as paid "volunteers" with the UN, international NGOs and civil society groups.<sup>9</sup> "After I met a high-ranking official and told him about the problems in the camps, ARSA members came to my home at night and threatened me", said a woman activist. "I was sick with fear – I had to go to a safe house".<sup>10</sup>

ARSA's reign was not to last, however. From 2020 onward, it came into conflict with other Rohingya armed groups, some of them established by former ARSA members.<sup>11</sup> In September 2021, ARSA overreached when its members killed Mohib Ullah, a prominent political figure among refugees.<sup>12</sup> His death was reported by major inter-

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<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Cox's Bazar, June 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group Briefing, *Building a Better Future*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interviews, June and October 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, humanitarian workers and analysts, June 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee who works with an international NGO, June 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya woman activist, June 2023. See also "ARSA: End Abductions, Torture, Threats against Rohingya Refugees and Women Aid Workers", Fortify Rights, 14 March 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya woman activist, June 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interview, security expert in Cox's Bazar, June 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Mohib Ullah, who fled Rakhine State in 2017, helped document Myanmar military abuses against the Rohingya and established a civil society organisation, the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights. He organised "Genocide Day" rallies on the anniversary of the outbreak of vio-



national media outlets, drawing attention to the mounting insecurity in the camps, and finally forcing the Bangladeshi government to acknowledge that ARSA was present and had become a problem.<sup>13</sup> The security forces began to take more concerted action against the group, intensifying the crackdown following an incident in November 2022, when a Bangladeshi military intelligence officer was killed in a shootout, reportedly by ARSA members who were trafficking drugs close to the Myanmar border at the Zero Point or No Man's Land camp near Gundum.<sup>14</sup>

Around the same time, an older Rohingya armed group, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), re-emerged as an important player.<sup>15</sup> In January 2023, its members attacked Zero Point – which Bangladesh did not recognise as an official refugee camp – burning it to the ground as ARSA members fled.<sup>16</sup> Media reports said the Bangladeshi security forces – which do not enter the area because they consider it Myanmar territory, although it is beyond a Myanmar-built border fence – had sought the RSO's aid to clear ARSA from the area.<sup>17</sup> Sources in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar later repeated these allegations to Crisis Group, although officials from both the army and government insist they are unfounded.<sup>18</sup>

Refugees also said they believe the RSO still has the backing of the Bangladeshi army and police. "ARSA is on the government's bad side. ... So now the RSO is getting support from the security forces to attack ARSA", said one Rohingya, who serves as a *majhi*, an unpaid official appointed by the Bangladeshi authorities to manage a section of the camps together with the police and the camp-in-charge, a government official.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the Zero Point incident and the RSO's sudden reappearance over the past year, the refugees pointed to the fact that the RSO can carry out activities during the daytime, when security personnel are on the job, whereas ARSA had previously operated only at night; several said they had seen Bangladeshi law enforcement and RSO members working together in the camps.<sup>20</sup>

Violence has continued to increase through 2023, particularly between members of these two outfits. According to official figures, armed groups were responsible for almost 50 killings in the camps in the first half of the year, more than the number rec-

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lence in Rakhine. He was also an important interlocutor with the outside world, even receiving an invitation to the White House when Donald Trump was president.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, "Mohib Ullah, 46, dies; documented ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya", *The New York Times*, 2 October 2021; and "Bangladesh charges 29 Rohingya over murdered activist Mohib Ullah", Al Jazeera, 13 June 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023. See also "Bangladesh launches police probe on ARSA chief and others over intelligence officer's death", *The Irrawaddy*, 26 November 2022.

<sup>15</sup> The RSO formed in 1982 and carried out hit-and-run attacks on Myanmar forces from across the Bangladeshi border during the 1990s. Internal disputes and Bangladeshi counter-insurgency campaigns left it "operationally defunct" from the mid-2000s. Most of its leaders went either into hiding in Bangladesh or into exile. See "In Bangladesh's border with Myanmar, 2 Rohingya militant groups fight for dominance", Radio Free Asia, 2 February 2022; and "The Rohingya and Islamic Extremism: A Convenient Myth", Institute for Security and Development Policy, June 2015.

<sup>16</sup> "In Bangladesh's border with Myanmar", op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> "Myanmar Bangladesh joint offensive cracks down on Rohingya", *Southeast Asia Globe*, 16 February 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, army official and government official, June and November 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, *majhi*, June 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugee and security expert in Cox's Bazar, June 2023.

orded in all of 2022, which was itself almost double the total for 2021.<sup>21</sup> The real number of violent deaths in the camps is likely to be higher, as not all are reported. On 6-7 July 2023, a further seven Rohingya were killed during a visit to the main Kutupalong camp by the International Criminal Court prosecutor, Karim Khan, who was gathering testimony for a case against senior Myanmar military officials.<sup>22</sup> Clashes began when an ARSA member reportedly killed a Rohingya assistant *majhi* who had been arranging for refugees to meet with Khan; in retaliation, the RSO shot five ARSA members dead, and the latter group responded by killing an RSO supporter.<sup>23</sup>

Dhaka has also taken stronger action to stop ARSA over the past eighteen months. The security forces have stepped up arrests of senior members, including a man described as the group's "finance coordinator". A personal assistant to ARSA chief Attaullah Abu Ammar Jununi, he was also allegedly involved in the killing of the military officer in November 2022.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, in mid-2023 the government dismissed many *majhis* suspected of collaborating with ARSA.

Aware that the group is on the wane, and feeling increasingly vulnerable, low-level ARSA members are defecting to the RSO.<sup>25</sup> The ARSA committees that once informally controlled many of the camps, collecting taxes and administering justice, are now largely dysfunctional.<sup>26</sup>

Support for ARSA among the refugees has also collapsed; in interviews with Crisis Group, most Rohingya said if they had to choose, they preferred the RSO. But they evinced a strong desire to get rid of armed groups completely, if possible, and also expressed concern that if the RSO were to gain firm control it would replicate ARSA's repressive behaviour. "Definitely people don't like ARSA", said a Rohingya woman activist, "but when the two groups fire at each other, we are disappointed with both sides".<sup>27</sup> Many Rohingya live in fear of being caught up in the turf wars, and in general refugees report insecurity as being as big a concern as declining support from aid organisations (see Section III).<sup>28</sup> "The camp is never peaceful anymore, never secure for anyone", said an imam.<sup>29</sup>

Crime not directly related to the ARSA-RSO battles is also increasing in Cox's Bazar's overcrowded camps. An analyst monitoring crime in the camps recorded more than 700 abductions in the first nine months of 2023, up from around 200 in 2022 and 100 the year before.<sup>30</sup> A refugee told Crisis Group there were at least five armed entities, including ARSA and RSO, operating in his camp. "They are very active in people smuggling, kidnapping and other unlawful activities", he said.

<sup>21</sup> "Bangladesh: Spiraling Violence against Rohingya Refugees", Human Rights Watch, 13 July 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Although Myanmar is not a party to the Rome Statute, the 2002 treaty establishing the International Criminal Court, a pre-trial chamber in September 2018 ruled that the Court has jurisdiction over the crime against humanity of deportation and other crimes of a cross-border nature because Bangladesh has been a party to the treaty since 2010.

<sup>23</sup> "Seven Rohingya refugees killed in violence in Bangladesh", VOA, 8 July 2023.

<sup>24</sup> "ARSA chief's personal secretary arrested in Cox's Bazar", *The Business Standard*, 4 October 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023; humanitarian official, August 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, August 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya woman activist, June 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya imam, June 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Data provided to Crisis Group by an analyst monitoring violence in the camps.

But the impact of growing insecurity has been felt unevenly, varying not only from camp to camp, but even from block to block within individual camps, based on factors like proximity to main roads, where security patrols are most frequent, or forests, which enable criminals and armed group members to slip in and out of the camps – and evade arrest – with ease. “The camps are like a city of a million people – there are nice neighbourhoods and bad neighbourhoods”, a humanitarian official said.<sup>31</sup>

Certain individuals and groups are also more at risk than others. Men are more likely to be targeted than women, while young and middle-aged adults typically face greater threats than older refugees. Those holding positions of authority, such as *majhi*, or individuals who are active in civil society, for example members of women’s and youth groups, are particularly vulnerable.<sup>32</sup> “Young men are most at risk from armed groups and security forces. When they cannot endure it any longer, they pay smugglers to get them to Malaysia”, a refugee explained.<sup>33</sup>

The drug trade has contributed to the rise of Rohingya armed and criminal groups in the camps. The porous Myanmar-Bangladesh frontier has long made Cox’s Bazar a hotspot for illicit activity, primarily drug smuggling. Myanmar’s emergence as a major global producer of methamphetamines in the late 1990s, combined with the growth of Bangladesh and India as markets for these drugs, has turbocharged the profits from this trade.<sup>34</sup> Local syndicates that predate the 2016-2017 Rohingya refugee influx into Bangladesh have cooperated with Rohingya armed groups to recruit refugees to move drugs across the border at great personal risk.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, sharper conflict in Myanmar since the 2021 coup has eroded Naypyitaw’s influence over the main drug production centres, primarily in Shan State; instead, non-state armed groups have tightened their grip, prompting a surge of illicit activity, including drug production.<sup>36</sup> Local experts claim that both ethnic armed groups in Myanmar and the Myanmar security forces – or at least individuals within the military – are probably involved in trafficking.<sup>37</sup>

Politics in Bangladesh also appear to be quietly enabling crime in Cox’s Bazar by shielding certain actors from law enforcement. Bangladesh’s Department of Narcotics Control and at least four other agencies have identified Abdur Rahman Bodi, a ruling Awami League member who was formerly MP for Teknaf, a city across the Naf estu-

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<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, August 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian officials, June 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, June 2023.

<sup>34</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Report N°299, *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar’s Shan State*, 9 January 2019; and “Bangladesh at the hub of three drug trafficking regions”, *Prothom Alo*, 7 January 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interviews, June 2023.

<sup>36</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Report N°332, *Transnational Crime and Geopolitical Contestation along the Mekong*, 18 August 2023; and “Huge increase in transnational crime and synthetic drugs in SE Asia requires cross-border cooperation”, UN News, 2 June 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, June 2023. See also “Myanmar junta’s drug trafficking links”, *The Diplomat*, 29 June 2023; “Drug raid links Myanmar army chief’s children to notorious weapons dealer”, *Vice*, 12 January 2023; and Crisis Group Report, *Fire and Ice*, op. cit.

ary from Myanmar, as the “godfather” of the methamphetamine trade.<sup>38</sup> The department has also implicated dozens of his relatives.<sup>39</sup> Though the Bodi clan have denied the charges, the fact that they have avoided any sanction leads to speculation that they have political protection.<sup>40</sup> An Anti-Corruption Commission charge against Bodi from 2007 is unresolved, while he is on bail having appealed a three-year sentence imposed in 2016 for concealing his wealth from the Commission.<sup>41</sup> When the Awami League eventually forced him to give up his seat in parliament in 2018, it selected his wife to run in his place. She was subsequently elected.<sup>42</sup> Yet Bodi has been quoted saying he is still an MP: “My wife is the MP. So am I. ... After all, our religion directs women to abide by their husbands”.<sup>43</sup>

More generally, the 2017 refugee crisis has provided useful cover for Bangladeshi involvement in the local illicit economy, with much of the blame shifted to the Rohingya.

Armed groups have also benefited from a weak, poorly coordinated response to their activities by Bangladeshi security forces. In July 2020, the Bangladeshi army handed responsibility for internal security to two Armed Police Battalion units overseen by the Ministry of Home Affairs, with a combined 1,176 members when at full strength.<sup>44</sup> The UN had advocated for the transfer of security responsibility to a civilian force in line with the humanitarian principle of maintaining the civilian character of refugee sites, but it quickly became apparent that the Battalion units were unable to fulfil the role.<sup>45</sup>

Although a third Battalion unit is now also involved, these units lack the resources – both in terms of officers and equipment – to properly police the camps, particularly given the lack of roads.<sup>46</sup> Battalion commanders also concede that most officers are unmotivated and have poor service records.<sup>47</sup> Although they are responsible for security around the clock, they tend to delegate night-time patrols to teams of unarmed

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<sup>38</sup> See “MP Badi and family involved in yaba trade”, *bdnews24.com*, 5 May 2014; and “Yaba ‘godfathers’: Out of Teknaf, into safety”, *The Daily Star*, 3 June 2018. The Awami League has been in power in Bangladesh since winning the 2008 election.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> More than 100 drug dealers from the Teknaf area – including four of Bodi’s brothers and twelve other relatives – gave themselves up at a ceremony in February 2019, but they went into hiding in 2022 after a judge rescinded their bail. They remain at large. “Yaba godfathers have gone into hiding”, *Prothom Alo*, 23 November 2022.

<sup>41</sup> See “Testimony begins in corruption case against ex-MP Bodi”, *The Business Standard*, 23 September 2022; and “Graft: Convicted AL MP Bodi challenges jail sentence”, *The Daily Star*, 15 November 2016.

<sup>42</sup> “Testimony begins in corruption case against ex-MP Bodi”, *op. cit.*; and “Badi’s wife to run on AL’s ticket in Cox’s Bazar-4”, *Bangla Tribune*, 25 November 2018.

<sup>43</sup> “Bormaiya’ sex workers rampant in Cox’s Bazar”, *The Daily Messenger*, 6 July 2023.

<sup>44</sup> “Armed Police Battalions take charge of Rohingya camps in Cox’s Bazar”, *The Daily Star*, 2 July 2020. The Armed Police Battalion was created in 1975, and there are now close to twenty units in service. The Battalion units in the camps were newly created for the purpose.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN officials, June and November 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023. See also Mohammad Zillur Rahman, “Rohingya Influx, Security and Capability of Bangladesh Police in Rohingya Camps: An Assessment”, *Asian Journal of Social Science and Management Technology*, vol. 5, no. 2 (March-April 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Zillur Rahman, “Rohingya Influx, Security and Capability of Bangladesh Police in Rohingya Camps: An Assessment”, *op. cit.*

Rohingya, putting the refugees at risk of harm from armed groups.<sup>48</sup> Battalion members have also been accused of perpetrating a wide range of abuses against refugees, including arbitrary detention, torture and extortion.<sup>49</sup>

Interviews with Rohingya refugees revealed that the Armed Police Battalion units are widely viewed as unscrupulous. “Bribery is a big problem – the majority of [Battalion] police are corrupt. If you do business inside the camp and bring goods from outside, you need to pay a bribe to get through a checkpoint”, said one refugee.<sup>50</sup> Another said: “People are very disappointed with [the Battalion]. They will not do anything without a bribe”.<sup>51</sup> In some cases, they are also perceived to be colluding with armed groups in the camps.<sup>52</sup> (Battalion officials reject suggestions that officers can accept bribes without repercussions. They insist that they take complaints seriously.)<sup>53</sup>

The authorities are cognisant of the Armed Police Battalion’s failures. In July, the cabinet decided to introduce multi-agency “joint patrols” in the camps, with the Battalion units joined by detachments from three Home Affairs-controlled paramilitary forces – the Rapid Action Battalion, the Border Guard Bangladesh and Ansar – as well as local police.<sup>54</sup> Later the same month, Home Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said the government was considering redeploying the army to help the Battalion units contain the rising violence.<sup>55</sup> It has not done so yet, however, in part because each of the army and home affairs ministry wants to be in command.<sup>56</sup> Refugees told Crisis Group they would prefer the army to be in charge, as they consider it to be more effective and less corrupt.<sup>57</sup> Humanitarian workers privately concur that the army would do a better job, but feel unable to advocate for its return to the camps because it would go against humanitarian principles.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2023.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, “‘This Persecution is the Worst There is’: Restrictions on Rohingya Freedom of Movement in Bangladesh”, Rohingya Youth Congress, September 2023; “Bangladesh: Ensure Accountability for Police Corruption, Torture of Rohingya Refugees”, Fortify Rights, 10 August 2023; and “Bangladesh: Rampant Police Abuse of Rohingya Refugees”, Human Rights Watch, 17 January 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, June 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, June 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023.

<sup>53</sup> “Bangladesh police accused of abusing Rohingya refugees”, Deutsche Welle, 19 August 2023.

<sup>54</sup> One such operation in September featured 150 Armed Police Battalion members and 110 from the other agencies. “Three detained in law-and-order joint operation in Rohingya camp”, Ukhiya News, 22 September 2023 [Bengali]. See also “Joint patrol at Rohingya camps to continue”, *The Daily Star*, 27 August 2023.

<sup>55</sup> “Bangladesh ponders army deployment in Rohingya camps after spiral of violence, says home minister”, *bdnews24.com*, 19 July 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Although these units feature officers and soldiers seconded from the army, they fall under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Crisis Group interview, November 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023. See also “‘This Persecution is the Worst There is’”, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and humanitarian workers, June 2023.

### III. Dwindling Aid

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Rohingya refugees are suffering a further blow as donors significantly reduce funding for the gigantic humanitarian response. Foreign assistance for the Rohingya in Bangladesh remained steady in the first years of the refugee crisis, but in 2022, it dropped below \$600 million for the first time. The decline has accelerated in 2023; as of the end of November, the Rohingya response was barely 45 per cent funded, compared to 64 per cent in 2022 and 73 per cent in 2021.<sup>59</sup> The drop is primarily the result of competition posed by other crises, particularly that in Ukraine after Russia's all-out invasion, which has absorbed a great deal of humanitarian funding, particularly from the West. UN efforts to attract support from other potential donors, such as Gulf Arab countries, have yielded little. Rising food prices also mean that the funds that are coming in are not going as far. Looking toward the horizon, the view is even bleaker than it is at present. "Such significant funding requirements are challenging to sustain in the long term", a senior aid official working in the camps told Crisis Group.<sup>60</sup>

The cash crunch has forced the UN and humanitarian organisations to make tough choices. Expecting funding to decline, as it generally does in protracted crises, they had begun streamlining service delivery and camp management in 2021. But the scale of the shortfall in 2023 has forced the WFP to cut food support twice, leading to a total reduction of one third. Concretely, it has had to reduce the budget from \$12 per refugee a month to just \$8, or 27 cents a day.<sup>61</sup> The cuts have been devastating for many families in the camps, most of whom do not have an income with which to supplement their rations. Malnutrition rates are now climbing rapidly, particularly among children, and the UN estimates that 85 per cent of refugees may be facing crisis levels of food insecurity.<sup>62</sup>

Cuts to other vital services, ranging from health and nutrition to protection and education, have also had predictable consequences. In a stark example, an estimated 40 per cent of refugees were affected by scabies in 2023. The NGO Médecins Sans Frontières, which had warned of a growing outbreak in 2022, said it was due to a combination of overcrowding, inadequate water supplies, poorly maintained sanitation infrastructure and shortages of medicine.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For detailed information, see the "Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan 2023" and previous years' plans on the Financial Tracking Service website of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA).

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior aid official in Cox's Bazar, June 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Support was cut to \$10 a month from the start of March and again to \$8 in June. See "UN in Bangladesh announces devastating new round of rations cuts for Rohingya refugees", UN News, 1 June 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, October 2023. Even before the food aid cuts, 45 per cent of Rohingya families were eating an insufficient diet, leading to "widespread" malnutrition, according to the WFP. "Lack of funds forces WFP to cut rations for Rohingya in Bangladesh", World Food Programme, 17 February 2023.

<sup>63</sup> See "Unprecedented increase of scabies cases in Cox's Bazar refugee camps", press release, Médecins Sans Frontières, 25 March 2022; and "Bangladesh: MSF calls for an urgent and comprehensive response to the scabies outbreak in Cox's Bazar refugee camps", press release, Médecins Sans Frontières, 13 July 2023.

As aid dwindles, Rohingya refugees have adopted dangerous coping mechanisms. Many refugee families are already in debt to local moneylenders, making it difficult for them to obtain further credit, and skipping meals has become commonplace. Many have taken more drastic measures. More young men are joining armed groups and criminal gangs to get a monthly wage. Girls and women, meanwhile, are more frequently turning to sex work or are being married off at a young age, either inside the camps, to Bangladeshis outside them or to Rohingya men who have emigrated to Malaysia, which requires undertaking dangerous trips in boats run by smugglers. “Parents are deciding to send their girls to Malaysia for marriage, despite the risks”, said a Rohingya woman activist. “The men there pay for them to be smuggled. Sometimes they are only thirteen, fifteen years old”.<sup>64</sup>

The number of Rohingya, both men and women, attempting risky voyages to third countries – with Malaysia the preferred destination due to its large Rohingya population and higher wages – is increasing. In 2022, more than 3,500 Rohingya took to the sea to find sanctuary abroad, according to UN figures – five times the number in the previous year.<sup>65</sup> The smugglers often mistreat or abuse Rohingya, and their overloaded boats are prone to sinking: around 10 per cent of the Rohingya who set out on this trip in 2022 died or went missing en route. Yet prospective migrants have not been deterred; it is likely that even more will make the journey in 2023.<sup>66</sup> In the space of one week in November, five vessels carrying 866 people landed on the Indonesian island of Aceh, having spent up to two months at sea.<sup>67</sup> That the journeys continue shows just how desperate people are to leave, and arrivals have cited violence and poverty as key reasons.<sup>68</sup>

Tougher policies in destination countries toward Rohingya asylum seekers – including boat pushbacks, refusal to conduct search-and-rescue operations when boats capsize and indefinite immigration detention – have spurred the emergence of new smuggling routes. Rather than travel directly to Malaysia, Thailand or Indonesia by boat, from 2019 refugees started travelling through Myanmar using a combination of sea and ground transport, with some even making the entire trek overland, taking advantage of Myanmar’s porous borders.<sup>69</sup> As the recent arrivals in Aceh illustrate, some Rohingya still go directly to third countries by boat, but the Myanmar route is increasingly popular.

Although this route is perceived to be safer than travelling directly on smugglers’ boats, Rohingya have died while transiting through Myanmar. It also entails different risks. Because they are not allowed to move around freely in Myanmar, Rohingya who cross township boundaries without official permission face between two and

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<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya woman activist, June 2023.

<sup>65</sup> “Protection at Sea in South-East Asia – 2022 in Review”, UNHCR, January 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, November 2023.

<sup>67</sup> “Boats carrying 525 Rohingya land in Indonesia’s Aceh region”, Radio Free Asia, 19 November 2023.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. The actual number of Rohingya taking these trips is likely to be far higher than the UN figure, due to the difficulty in tracking them. See also “Gangs, extortion in Bangladesh camps driving Rohingya sea exodus”, France 24, 27 November 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya woman activist, June 2023. The UNHCR figures for 2022 include all trips that include movement by boat and therefore encompass some of these journeys through Myanmar.

five years in prison under immigration laws.<sup>70</sup> When caught, they are routinely prosecuted.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, they can be arrested once in Thailand or even after crossing illegally into Malaysia. Tracking such journeys is also much more difficult. Researchers rely in part on Myanmar arrest figures, but many more Rohingya make it to their destination than are caught. Informed sources say at least 10,000 Rohingya likely reach Malaysia each year.<sup>72</sup>

Alongside the growing insecurity in the camps, the cuts to food aid and other services risk forcing some refugees to return to Myanmar's Rakhine State, in effect, even though they believe conditions there are unsuitable for repatriation (see Section IV). As a Rohingya woman activist told Crisis Group:

Most people are dependent on the food rations, and when the WFP cut them a second time this year, people lost hope. ... Many assume it is a ploy to get us to repatriate. If they don't increase the rations, it will be difficult to survive, and we will be forced to go back.<sup>73</sup>

Women and girls are disproportionately harmed by the aid cuts. Traditional gender roles mean that they are responsible for ensuring the family has enough to eat – something that was already difficult, but has now become impossible without supplementary income; when there is not enough food, women and girls are usually the first to miss out.<sup>74</sup> Rohingya women Crisis Group spoke to said lack of money was causing an increase in intimate partner violence and divorce, something that aid groups have also noted.<sup>75</sup> A Rohingya imam agreed that couples were fighting more often due to financial difficulties: “Every day, I see that women are always worried, always thinking how they can survive. ... Many widows and poor families are crying every day. They cannot feed their children”.<sup>76</sup> One mother explained that her three daughters are unable to marry because the family cannot pay a dowry; local practices mean that the girls spend almost all their time inside the family's tiny shelter, rarely venturing outside.<sup>77</sup>

Although the funding gap stems in part from donors being confronted with competing priorities worldwide, Bangladeshi government policies have exacerbated the problem. Citing its own large population and development challenges, Dhaka is highly sensitive to any measures that suggest the Rohingya population may remain in Bangladesh for the long term, much less integrate into Bangladeshi society. Believing that repatriation is the only solution to the crisis, Dhaka blocks any action that it believes may discourage or delay Rohingya from returning to Myanmar.

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<sup>70</sup> A local NGO reported that the regime detained at least 2,240 Rohingya during 2022; other sources have put the number slightly higher. See “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burma”, U.S. Department of State, 15 May 2023.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, “Myanmar court sentences 116 Rohingya refugees for violating immigration laws”, Radio Free Asia, 9 January 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interviews, November 2023.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, June 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, June 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, June and October 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, imam, June 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, June 2023.



The government's reluctance to publicly acknowledge the protracted nature of the crisis manifests in a range of ways that undermine the sustainability of the humanitarian response. For example, Dhaka has resisted efforts by the UN and humanitarian agencies to shift from single- to multi-year plans, forcing them to mount an emergency-style response year after year. It has also long enforced a ban on refugees seeking employment, leaving many refugees heavily dependent on aid. Meanwhile, aid organisations are impeded from taking steps that would meet refugee needs in a cost-effective way. They can build only temporary shelters of bamboo and tarpaulin, which need to be replaced regularly, even though putting up more durable dwellings would save both time and money – and probably lives as well, given the regular cyclones that hit the region.<sup>78</sup>

To alleviate pressure on the Cox's Bazar area, Dhaka has encouraged refugees to relocate to Bhasan Char, a silt island it has repurposed to this end in the Bay of Bengal about 40km from the mainland. Although the island is unpopular among refugees due to its remoteness, around 30,000 Rohingya have been transferred there so far, the government's stated objective being to reach a total of 100,000. In some cases, refugees appear to have been coerced into moving to the island, including some who were physically brought there.<sup>79</sup> Beyond the risks associated with Bhasan Char – particularly from cyclones – the cost of delivering food and services on the low-lying island is higher than in Cox's Bazar, using up funds that could be spent more efficiently in the camps.<sup>80</sup>

The lack of a medium-term plan and attendant policies also makes it hard for aid agencies to attract development funding that could be used to shift away from an emergency response. Being in emergency response mode also adds significantly to the aid operation's cost. If more refugees were able to support themselves, the WFP could target assistance only to the most vulnerable, for example. The problem was lesser while donors continued to generously fund the UN's annual humanitarian response plan, but the decline in pledges has finally brought matters to a head. "Being in emergency response mode was fine because we had the luxury to pay for it, but that's not the case anymore. ... I really think we're at an inflection point in the aid response", said a senior official at one agency.<sup>81</sup>

When it comes to employment, Dhaka's policy is already at odds with reality. Because there are few avenues for Rohingya to work legally – getting a job as a paid "volunteer" with the UN or an NGO is the only possibility – many families rely on the informal economy to survive.<sup>82</sup> Tens of thousands of people are thought to leave the

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<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN and humanitarian officials, June 2023.

<sup>79</sup> The Bangladeshi authorities deny these allegations. "Fears of forced removals as Bangladesh moves hundreds of Rohingya refugees to remote island", CNN, 8 December 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Bhasan Char hosts around 3 per cent of the refugee population, but 17 per cent of aid commitments went to the Bhasan Char cluster in 2022, and 11 per cent in 2023 so far, according to OCHA's Financial Tracking Service. The cost of feeding a refugee on Bhasan Char has fallen, due to improved transport, but it is still 18 per cent higher than in Cox's Bazar. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, June and October 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior aid agency official, June 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Some refugees also rely on relatives living abroad, often in Malaysia or Saudi Arabia, who send them remittances through informal networks, as they cannot legally open a bank account. A survey found that 21 per cent of households received remittances; for more than 11 per cent remittances

camps every day to work in Cox's Bazar and can be found labouring on construction sites, in markets and on farms. Because they cannot do so legally, however, they receive low wages – in turn driving down pay rates for locals – and are at risk of exploitation or even violence at the hands of employers and security forces. Other Rohingya families operate small shops or businesses in the camps. Whether working informally outside the camp or running a business inside, refugees generally must pay bribes, primarily to Armed Police Battalion officers, particularly when they enter and exit the camps.<sup>83</sup>

While it has resisted many measures that reflect the protracted nature of the crisis it faces, Bangladesh has made some concessions. In January 2020, Bangladesh agreed to a UN proposal to introduce Myanmar-language education, replacing an emergency learning framework that had been put in place shortly after the Rohingya arrived – something that Crisis Group had been advocating for.<sup>84</sup> After delays due to COVID-19, the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot got under way in November 2021. The system was introduced throughout the camps in 2023, with 300,000 students reportedly enrolled in the current academic year.<sup>85</sup> The rollout has not been entirely smooth: refugees cited a litany of problems, including poorly motivated teachers, a lack of instructors who can speak Burmese and low attendance rates.<sup>86</sup> Still, the Myanmar Curriculum Project is a significant improvement on the early learning centres that preceded it, which Rohingya derisively referred to as little more than a “child-minding service”.<sup>87</sup> It provides, at least, a foundation on which further improvements can be made.

Another positive development has been Dhaka's decision to allow third-country resettlement to resume. Bangladesh had blocked Rohingya refugees from being resettled since 2010, on the grounds that the possibility of resettlement would act as a pull factor, encouraging more Rohingya to cross the border.<sup>88</sup> In 2022, however, it signalled that it would allow some refugees to be resettled for the first time in more than a decade.<sup>89</sup> The U.S. then announced it was launching a resettlement program for “the most vulnerable” refugees, and at least half a dozen other countries have followed suit, or are considering doing so.<sup>90</sup> Yet only around 500 have been resettled so

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provided more than half their annual income. “Beyond Relief: Securing Livelihoods and Agency for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”, The Asia Foundation, 7 May 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023.

<sup>84</sup> “Great news’: Bangladesh allows education for Rohingya children”, Al Jazeera, 30 January 2020. See also Crisis Group Report, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees*, op. cit., and Crisis Group Briefing, *Building a Better Future*, op. cit.

<sup>85</sup> “Against the odds, children begin the new school year in Rohingya refugee camps”, press release, UNICEF, 23 July 2023.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2019.

<sup>88</sup> “As other doors close, some Rohingya cling to hope of resettlement”, Reuters, 21 August 2020.

<sup>89</sup> See Kean, “Five Years On”, op. cit.; and “24 Rohingya leave Bangladesh for US”, Benar News, 8 December 2022.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dhaka-based diplomat, October 2023. “Resettlement Initiative for Vulnerable Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh”, U.S. Department of State, 13 December 2022. Australia, Canada and New Zealand have agreed to admit Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, while Japan and the Philippines are planning to take a handful of Rohingya through what are referred to as “complementary pathways”, whereby they are allowed to study or work in those countries.

far, partly because countries have committed to only small intakes, but also because of bureaucratic delays, including Dhaka's sluggishness in issuing exit permits for those approved.<sup>91</sup> Resettlement will be life-changing for those who are selected and, as discussed below, it can also have symbolic value. But even if states ramp up programs significantly, the effect will be limited. Far less than 1 per cent of refugees worldwide are resettled each year.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, June and October 2023. See also "Rohingya resettlements from Bangladesh increase while Myanmar instability grows", *The Irrawaddy*, 27 November 2023.

<sup>92</sup> "Global Trends Report 2022", UNHCR, 14 June 2023.

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## IV. Repatriation Redux

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### A. *A Trilateral Push*

In recent months, Bangladesh and Myanmar's military regime have resumed efforts to repatriate Rohingya refugees to Rakhine State under a bilateral agreement signed in November 2017. Two earlier attempts, in November 2018 and August 2019, were unsuccessful, due primarily to Myanmar's then-government, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, failing to provide guarantees to the Rohingya regarding citizenship, security and other key concerns.<sup>93</sup> Negotiations were then put on hold, due first to COVID-19 and then to the February 2021 coup in Myanmar. In January 2022, the military regime restarted talks with Dhaka, and in June of the same year, a joint working group met for the first time in more than three years.<sup>94</sup>

Already involved in the 2019 repatriation attempt, China re-emerged in late 2022 as a mediator, adding momentum to the negotiations.<sup>95</sup> Appointed in December, Beijing's new special envoy for Asian affairs, Deng Xijun, has paid several visits to both Naypyitaw and Dhaka, raising the repatriation issue each time.<sup>96</sup> Beijing also convened a trilateral meeting on the issue in Kunming, China, in April 2023, encouraging the sides to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, principally related to verification of refugee identity and eligibility, that were preventing them from moving the repatriation process forward at a bilateral level.<sup>97</sup> All three countries are eager to see repatriation take place, albeit for very different reasons.

- Myanmar's military regime wants some refugees to return in order to assist with its defence at the International Court of Justice, where The Gambia has brought a case against it under the Genocide Convention for the 2017 crackdown on the Rohingya in Rakhine State.<sup>98</sup> From the regime's point of view, allowing returns would undermine allegations that it committed genocide, which requires showing that the perpetrator had genocidal intent.

More broadly, and however wishful its thinking may be, it believes that repatriation will alleviate international pressure it is facing in the post-coup crisis.<sup>99</sup> Yet it will only be willing to take back a limited number of refugees – likely far short of the 750,000-plus who entered Bangladesh in 2016–2017. Myanmar authorities say no more than 500,000 fled to Bangladesh, claiming that some of these people are “newcomers” who had migrated illegally to Rakhine State. They have so far reviewed the eligibility of barely 15 per cent of the Rohingya whom Bangladesh

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<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group Report, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees*, op. cit.

<sup>94</sup> “Bangladesh and Myanmar resume talks on Rohingya repatriation”, *The Diplomat*, 8 February 2022; and “Rohingya return: Talks get nowhere”, *The Daily Star*, 20 June 2022.

<sup>95</sup> “Rohingya repatriation: China now active but uncertainties yet to clear up”, *The Daily Star*, 30 May 2023.

<sup>96</sup> “Chinese special envoy pays ‘secret’ visit to Dhaka”, *Prothom Alo*, 1 August 2023.

<sup>97</sup> “China hosts Myanmar junta and Bangladesh to discuss Rohingya repatriations”, *The Irrawaddy*, 20 April 2023.

<sup>98</sup> For background on the International Court of Justice case, see Richard Horsey, “Myanmar at the International Court of Justice”, Crisis Group Commentary, 10 December 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interview, Myanmar official, September 2023.

has put forward for repatriation. Of those, they have rejected around one third.<sup>100</sup> An official told Crisis Group that the process would move slowly, as the Myanmar side wanted to make sure there were no “extremists” among the returnees. The official added: “Those refugees who have settled in Myanmar for generations will want to come back and getting citizenship should be easy for them. Those who are newcomers from Bangladesh, they won’t want to come back”.<sup>101</sup>

- Bangladesh’s Awami League government is keen to show progress on repatriation to the public, including ahead of a general election scheduled for January 2024. At first, the decision to accept Rohingya refugees was popular in the Muslim-majority country. But over six years on, many are growing impatient with the situation, particularly Bangladeshis in Cox’s Bazar.<sup>102</sup> Recent large-scale surveys have shown there is little support for even allowing the Rohingya to stay in Bangladesh until it is safe to return.<sup>103</sup> Meanwhile, the opposition Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) has criticised the government’s handling of the crisis and put forward its own sixteen-point plan for “resolving” it.<sup>104</sup> Movement on repatriation, even if minuscule, would give a boost to the Awami League at a time when it is facing increased domestic and international pressure ahead of the election.<sup>105</sup> Given its

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<sup>100</sup> In 2018, Bangladesh gave Myanmar the details of more than 800,000 Rohingya refugees. In November, Myanmar authorities said they have reviewed 138,000. Of those, they said, 47,000 had “no documents to prove that they lived in Myanmar”. “Bilateral pilot project commences for repatriation of displaced persons from Rakhine State”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 22 November 2023. See also “Interview with an official from the Political Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the matter of repatriation of the displaced persons from Rakhine State”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 17 March 2023; and “Rohingya return: Talks get nowhere”, *op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview, Myanmar official, September 2023.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interviews, June 2023. See also “Conflict Dynamics between Bangladeshi Host Communities and Rohingya Refugees”, International Republican Institute, 12 April 2023.

<sup>103</sup> An Asia Foundation survey found that 81 per cent of respondents believed Rohingya refugees were having negative effects on Bangladesh. Support for allowing them to stay until it is safe to return fell from 45 per cent in 2018 to just 14 per cent. Similarly, 68 per cent of respondents to an International Republican Institute survey said the Rohingya should return immediately; just 26 per cent agreed they should stay until it is safe to return. See “The State of Bangladesh’s Political Governance, Development and Society: According to Its Citizens”, The Asia Foundation, 29 August 2023, and “National Survey of Bangladesh: March-April 2023”, International Republican Institute, 8 August 2023.

<sup>104</sup> “Govt failure leads Rohingya issue to obscurity: BNP”, *New Age*, 3 September 2023; and “Sixteen BNP proposals for dealing with the Rohingya crisis”, *Jagonews24.com*, 3 September 2023 [Bengali]. While the policy maintains a strong focus on repatriation, the sixteen points also include: enabling adult Rohingya to work, because “relying solely on donors ... is unsustainable”; building civilian Rohingya leadership in the camps “to counter the growing criminal activity”; ensuring Rohingya children have access to “comprehensive” education; taking into account the “views and aspirations” of refugees when formulating repatriation plans; and facilitating meetings between Rakhine and Rohingya communities to encourage dialogue and reconciliation.

<sup>105</sup> The international pressure stems from the Awami League government’s increasingly authoritarian practices. The U.S. sanctioned Bangladesh’s paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion and six current and former members in December 2021 for their role in extrajudicial killings. In May 2023, it announced that anyone deemed to undermine the January 2024 elections would be subject to a visa ban. The ban would also apply to their immediate family members. “Treasury Sanctions Perpetrators of Serious Human Rights Abuse on International Human Rights Day”, U.S. Department of Treas-

refusal to allow refugees to integrate into Bangladesh, Bhasan Char's unpopularity with most Rohingya and the fact that resettlement opportunities are scarce, the government sees repatriation as an area where it might make some progress.

- For China, facilitating Rohingya repatriation is an opportunity to cement its position as a partner of Dhaka and Naypyitaw at a time of heightened geopolitical competition with the U.S. It also wishes to project an image as a constructive player in the international arena – burnishing its credentials as a mediator, following its brokering of an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March.<sup>106</sup> Since it emerged from its extremely stringent pandemic management measures, which it lifted from December 2022, and appointed Deng as special envoy for Asian affairs at the end of 2022, Beijing has stepped up its engagement in Myanmar, and seems keen to increase its leverage with the military regime.<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, the Awami League government in Bangladesh has over the past decade expanded economic and political cooperation with Beijing, a relationship that the latter is happy to continue building as it seeks to reduce its reliance on traditional ally India and Western countries.<sup>108</sup>

### B. *The Pilot Project*

In early 2023, Dhaka and Naypyitaw agreed to a repatriation pilot project, including a first phase under which 1,176 refugees would be able to return to Rakhine State – although not necessarily to their communities of origin. In March, the regime took diplomats from eight countries – including Bangladesh, China and India – on a tour of northern Rakhine State, with the aim of convincing them that conditions are conducive for Rohingya to return.<sup>109</sup> Later that month, a junta team spent a week in Cox's Bazar interviewing hundreds of refugees to verify their eligibility for repatriation under the pilot project.<sup>110</sup> In May, Naypyitaw invited a delegation of refugees for a “go-and-see” visit to Maungdaw Township in northern Rakhine, where they visited a reception centre and model villages of the sort where they would be resettled. Its representatives followed up with another visit to the camps in southern Bangladesh.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the two sides' eagerness to get repatriation moving, the pilot project faltered when it became clear that none of the Rohingya listed for repatriation were willing to return under current conditions.<sup>112</sup> The refugees have certain common demands, including that they receive citizenship on return and can return to their original villages. The regime, though, remains unwilling to budge on many of these

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ury, 10 December 2021; and “Announcement of Visa Policy to Promote Democratic Elections in Bangladesh”, U.S. Department of State, 24 May 2023.

<sup>106</sup> “Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China's Role as an International Mediator”, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 23 June 2023.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interviews, May-October 2023.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interviews, June and October 2023.

<sup>109</sup> “Rohingya return: Myanmar steps up verification amid global pressure”, *The Daily Star*, 11 March 2023.

<sup>110</sup> “Myanmar delegation returns home after verifying info of 500 Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 22 March 2023.

<sup>111</sup> “Rohingya delegation visits Myanmar amid latest repatriation plans”, Al Jazeera, 5 May 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, June 2023.

demands. For example, rather than giving returnees automatic citizenship, it insists that they register under a citizenship verification scheme, which offers neither any meaningful rights nor any guarantee of being afforded citizenship.<sup>113</sup> Refugees have criticised other aspects of the repatriation plan, including the requirement that they stay in transit camps for an unspecified duration and the prospect of being resettled in “model villages” that may be distant from their place of origin.<sup>114</sup> But refugees also face pressure from within their own community not to return, particularly from ARSA and members of the diaspora.

Bangladesh responded to this impasse by moving beyond the list of prospects that it had compiled with Myanmar and inviting volunteers for repatriation to register on lists being compiled by camp officials. While some did sign up, those Crisis Group spoke to said they did so primarily because they wanted to be able to express their views on repatriation to the Bangladeshi and Myanmar authorities. They said they were not willing to go without key guarantees, including on citizenship.<sup>115</sup>

After a few months of quiet, China-mediated repatriation talks resumed in earnest in the first week of September. The Myanmar junta led another delegation of ambassadors to northern Rakhine, and a Bangladeshi foreign ministry team travelled to Naypyitaw. Regime officials revealed that, as per an agreement reached with Bangladesh and brokered by China, they had committed to taking back as many as 7,000 Rohingya by the end of 2023.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile, the head of the Bangladeshi delegation, director-general Miah Mohammad Mainul Kabir, told journalists that the regime had agreed to allow Rohingya to return to their native villages.<sup>117</sup>

This last item would have been a significant concession by the regime and could have made repatriation more attractive to refugees. But the regime minister overseeing repatriation, Ko Ko Hlaing, gave a different version of events, telling Burmese-language state media that after being screened at a transit centre, returnees could choose to settle in one of around twenty “new villages” that would be “close to the old villages where they originally lived”; alternatively, they could return to their former home if it was still standing.<sup>118</sup> Myanmar officials reiterated this stance in recent meetings with refugees in Bangladesh.<sup>119</sup> The ambiguity about the junta’s policy, the lack of guarantees around citizenship and the well-founded mistrust of the military among the Rohingya mean that few are likely to take up the offer.

Despite this impasse, the Bangladeshi authorities continue to insist that repatriation is the only viable solution to the Rohingya crisis. Although Dhaka is unlikely to force the refugees to return, its policies in Cox’s Bazar are clearly aimed at prevent-

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<sup>113</sup> For background, see Horsey, “Will Rohingya Refugees Start Returning to Myanmar in 2018?”, op. cit.

<sup>114</sup> Most of the villages where the Rohingya lived prior to 2017 were burned when they fled and later razed to the ground. “Displaced Rohingya ‘dissatisfied’ with arrangements for possible repatriation on maiden visit to Myanmar”, Anadolu Agency, 6 May 2023.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023.

<sup>116</sup> “Even though we suffered from Cyclone Mocha, the people are safe and secure. I am very proud of the Myanmar government’s actions as I have seen that they are getting a better social life”, Kye-mon, 5 September 2023 [Burmese].

<sup>117</sup> “Rohingya repatriation: Likely to start in a few months”, *The Daily Star*, 6 September 2023.

<sup>118</sup> “Even though we suffered from Cyclone Mocha”, op. cit.

<sup>119</sup> “Rohingyas willing to go home, not to model villages”, *The Daily Star*, 7 November 2023.

ing integration into Bangladeshi society and prodding refugees to go back. As discussed above, Dhaka restricts the rights of the Rohingya and the types of aid and planning it allows to avoid what it perceives to be steps that would facilitate local integration. One reason for its crackdown on ARSA appears to be that the group is openly opposed to repatriation.<sup>120</sup>

Finally, although political activity in the camps is generally prohibited, state agencies – particularly National Security Intelligence – have allowed or even encouraged Rohingya to hold events demanding repatriation, such as “go home” demonstrations in August 2022, June 2023 and August 2023.<sup>121</sup> These gatherings, which drew tens of thousands of refugees, could only have occurred with a green light from the authorities. The state’s hand was also evident in banners at the protests referring to the Rohingya as “foreign displaced Myanmar nationals”, a term coined by the Bangladeshi government.<sup>122</sup> The Bangladeshi authorities have also allowed former RSO leaders, including founder Mohammad Yunus, to carry out political activities in the camps under the guise of a new organisation, the Arakan Rohingya National Alliance.<sup>123</sup>

Most refugees remain eager to return to Myanmar; interviews with Rohingya in Cox’s Bazar indicate that, if anything, their desire to go home has increased due to worsening conditions in the camps.<sup>124</sup> Rohingya community leaders have dropped some of the prerequisites for repatriation that they put forward in 2019, whittling the list down to a handful of key demands, with citizenship at the top of the list along with return to their original villages.<sup>125</sup> But, understandably, the Rohingya do not trust the military regime’s promises, not least because they fall considerably short of what the refugees are seeking. Having been forced from Myanmar repeatedly since the 1970s, and having been denied citizenship for decades, they have little confidence that the National Verification scheme will offer a pathway to citizenship and fundamental rights. “People want to return”, said a refugee, “but when we hear that Myanmar will not accept any demand from Rohingya on citizenship and our original land, we lose hope. Maybe some will still go back in this situation, but the majority are not willing”.<sup>126</sup>

### C. *Conditions in Rakhine State*

The reluctance of Rohingya in Bangladesh to repatriate is informed by the experience of the estimated 600,000 who remain in Rakhine State, with whom they maintain contact. Myanmar’s refusal to give the Rohingya guarantees on citizenship means that their future looks bleak. Lacking citizenship documentation, the vast majority

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<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers and analysts, June 2023.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023.

<sup>122</sup> National Security Intelligence also supported creation of a Foreign Displaced Myanmar Nationals Representative Committee, which has been active in the camps. Crisis Group interviews, June 2023.

<sup>123</sup> “‘ARNA’ held a prayer meeting for Cyclone Mocha victims with the refugees”, Arakan Rohingya National Alliance, 21 June 2023.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Rohingya refugees, June 2023.

<sup>125</sup> Among the demands that have been dropped are accountability for perpetrators of violence in the 2016-2017 crackdown and recognition of the Rohingya as an official ethnic group. See “Wary Rohingya refugees set out terms for repatriation to Myanmar from Bangladesh”, Radio Free Asia, 31 October 2018.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rohingya refugee, June 2023.



of Rohingya are generally unable to travel, get an education or formal employment, legally own land or vote.

Some of the Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State hold a National Verification Card – the same item that has been offered to Rohingya refugees who return from Bangladesh – which the authorities provide pending a decision on citizenship. This document, however, provides few additional rights, and Rohingya believe that by agreeing to sign up for the scheme they are in effect acknowledging that they are foreigners.<sup>127</sup> A small number have been able to change their status to that of naturalised citizens, but only after paying substantial bribes.<sup>128</sup> Payments to secure the documents and recommendation letters needed to apply only add to the cost, and those who have obtained their naturalised citizenship cards say they face continued discrimination from local authorities.<sup>129</sup>

At the same time as they face an uphill struggle to secure equal rights, already precarious living conditions have deteriorated. Indeed, thanks to the combined effects of conflict, COVID-19 and the coup, which have devastated Rakhine State's economy, these conditions are at their worst since the exodus of 2017.<sup>130</sup> At least 148,000 Rohingya remain displaced in camps, villages and displacement sites; most are confined to internally displaced person (IDP) camps near the state capital, Sittwe, where they have lived for more than a decade.<sup>131</sup> The rest of the community lives mainly in the northern part of the state, primarily in Rathedaung, Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships. Although they are not confined to camps, limitations placed on their freedom of movement and other rights mean that employment options are limited and, thus, many are also reliant on international aid, particularly food assistance provided by the WFP.

Following in the footsteps of the former elected government, the military regime has tried to close IDP camps, without providing proper alternatives for those evicted. As with repatriation, the decision seems to be designed to improve its image – in this case, by reducing the number of displaced people in the country.<sup>132</sup> The regime has shown little care for the welfare of residents of the two camps that have shut down so far. Former residents of the Kyauktalone IDP camp, in Kyaukphyu Township, are languishing in a shabby resettlement site close to the old camp, where they still face move-

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<sup>127</sup> “‘They tried to erase us’: Rohingya IDs deny citizenship”, Reuters, 29 November 2022.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, September 2023. See also “Immigration chief in Buthidaung Township reportedly working with local brokers to extort excessive amounts of money from applicants and shouting abuse at them”, *The Arakan Express News*, 13 September 2023 [Burmese].

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, September 2023.

<sup>130</sup> Cyclone Mocha, which hit Myanmar in May, dealt a further blow to the Rohingya, destroying an estimated 85 per cent of the shelters in IDP camps, with some near low-lying Sittwe entirely wiped out. The regime subsequently blocked a UN aid delivery plan, as well as a second UN proposal to bring supplies across the border from Bangladesh. See “Myanmar: Cyclone Mocha Situation Report No. 1”, OCHA, 25 May 2023.

<sup>131</sup> Since fleeing communal violence in 2012, Rohingya in IDP camps have been almost entirely dependent on international aid. See “UNHCR steps up aid for displaced in Myanmar as conflict intensifies”, press release, UNHCR, 11 February 2022.

<sup>132</sup> As of October, UNHCR figures showed, 1.67 million people had been displaced in Myanmar since the coup, and an estimated 95,600 had sought refuge in neighbouring countries. “Myanmar Emergency Update (as of 2 October 2023)”, UNHCR, 31 October 2023.

ment restrictions and lack access to services. In contrast, the regime has expended significant energy on the issue of nomenclature, demanding that the UN no longer refer to those who have been expelled from the camps as IDPs, despite the unchanged living conditions.<sup>133</sup> Aid groups worry the change in terminology could make it harder to provide these Rohingya with support, due to additional access limitations.

The security situation in Rakhine State is another major concern for refugees. Since they fled across the border in 2016-2017, the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic armed group led by Rakhine Buddhists, has emerged as a powerful actor, transforming the state's political landscape. From 2018-2020, the group fought a brutal war with the Myanmar military. Then, during a period of calm brought about by an informal ceasefire, it was able to assert control over a swathe of rural Rakhine, including areas home to many Rohingya.<sup>134</sup>

The AA's ascent has brought some positive developments for Rakhine State's Rohingya population. The group's leaders have emphasised their view that the majority Burmans in Myanmar, rather than Muslims, are the real enemy of the Rakhine people, helping defuse earlier communal tensions between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. The AA has also tried to bring the communities together, such as in football matches and cultural events; eased movement restrictions on Rohingya in areas it controls; and included Rohingya in the lower levels of its bureaucracy.<sup>135</sup>

On the whole, however, the Rohingya feel caught between the AA and the military, which has threatened community figures with arrest if they are found to be cooperating with the ethnic armed group's administration. Rohingya living in mixed-control areas must pay taxes to both the regime and the AA – and yet they often cannot get services from either entity. They also face discrimination at the hands of local AA officials, despite the signals of tolerance from the group's leaders.<sup>136</sup>

A resurgence of Rohingya armed group activity in northern Rakhine State now also threatens to chill the warming relations between the Rakhine and Rohingya. Around the middle of 2023, a number of ARSA members appear to have crossed the border into Maungdaw and Buthidaung after being pushed out of Bangladesh by the RSO and Bangladeshi security forces. Tensions between ARSA and the AA have ensued.<sup>137</sup> In July, the AA reportedly killed at least five ARSA members in Buthidaung.<sup>138</sup> Residents said ARSA killed up to six Rohingya from the township between March and September.<sup>139</sup> From late September, the AA stepped up patrols in Rohingya villages

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<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, July 2023.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°307, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 9 June 2020. Crisis Group Asia Report N°325, *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 1 June 2022.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding a Return to War*, op. cit.

<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interview, May 2022.

<sup>137</sup> Rakhine media outlets have accused the military regime of allowing ARSA members to return to foment communal tension between Rohingya and Rakhine. "AA monitors actions by military council and ARSA in Rakhine", *Narinjara*, 30 August 2023.

<sup>138</sup> See "ARSA and AA fight in Buthidaung", *DVB*, 20 July 2023 [Burmese].

<sup>139</sup> "Buthidaung residents worried about ARSA presence", *RFA Burmese*, 26 September 2023 [Burmese].

in Buthidaung to flush out ARSA forces, detaining suspects.<sup>140</sup> Fears of renewed Rohingya insurgency among ethnic Rakhine could easily fuel anti-Rohingya sentiment.

Renewed fighting between the military and the AA also remains a constant risk. After more than eighteen months of relative calm, heavy clashes resumed in August 2022; a new ceasefire was reached that November, but the AA has avoided formal talks with the regime. Instead, it has continued to strengthen its self-administration, engaged with the opposition National Unity Government and armed anti-military resistance forces.<sup>141</sup> On 27 October, AA fighters based in northern Myanmar also joined counterparts from two other ethnic armed groups in carrying out attacks on military garrisons in Shan State, capturing a string of regime outposts and even several towns.<sup>142</sup>

Clashes have continued. On 13 November, the AA hit regime positions in parts of Rakhine State itself, marking the breakdown of the November 2022 ceasefire. Fighting since then has reportedly left 20,000 people displaced and about 30 civilians dead, including at least five Rohingya.<sup>143</sup> The risk is high that combat will spread to more areas where Rohingya live.<sup>144</sup> But Rohingya will certainly be affected by the blockade on road and waterway travel that the regime has instituted, which in effect cuts off food and other aid to the area in an attempt to force the AA into another ceasefire.

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<sup>140</sup> “Arakan Army is clearing terrorists from Rakhine State’s Buthidaung Township, says AA spokesperson U Khaing Thu Kha”, *Narinjara*, 26 October 2023 [Burmese].

<sup>141</sup> “Understanding the Arakan Army”, *Stimson Center*, 21 April 2023. Since the coup, the AA has significantly expanded its territory along the border with Bangladesh. The 2022 clashes were concentrated in Maungdaw Township, whence the majority of Rohingya fled five years earlier, and the ethnic armed group managed to capture several Border Guard Police posts.

<sup>142</sup> “Brotherhood Alliance vows to spread Operation 1027 across Myanmar”, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 November 2023.

<sup>143</sup> “Children slaughtered as Myanmar junta bombs villages across Rakhine”, *The Irrawaddy*, 29 November 2023.

<sup>144</sup> Richard Horsey, “A New Escalation of Armed Conflict in Myanmar”, *Crisis Group Commentary*, 17 November 2023.

## V. Policy Recommendations

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Numerous factors have conspired to create the desperate situation in the sprawling refugee camps for displaced Rohingya in southern Bangladesh. With humanitarian crises burgeoning from Gaza to Ukraine to the Horn of Africa, getting donors' attention is an increasing challenge. Yet it would be a terrible mistake to allow the situation to deteriorate even further, both from the perspective of the population's humanitarian needs and through the lens of regional security.

Two years ago, donors contributed almost \$700 million to the Rohingya refugee crisis Joint Response Plan; in 2023, the amount seems set to fall well below \$500 million. Arguably the most vital sectors – food security and nutrition – have faced the largest drops in funding. But cuts to programs due to lack of funds have affected almost all aspects of the response, from health to protection services.

The first and most urgent priority is to address this humanitarian funding gap. Donors should commit to increasing support for the Rohingya in Bangladesh in the short term. The aim should be to increase funds to around \$600 million a year for at least the next three years – a figure that would enable the WFP to restore its food assistance programs to \$12 per person per day, the amount required to provide the Rohingya with a diet that meets the minimum international standard for daily calorie intake.<sup>145</sup> The UN and its partners also need to have the funds to build shelters, provide cooking fuel, and deliver education and health care at a basic standard. Although donors often work on a yearly basis, multi-year funding could be raised through a conference.<sup>146</sup> Multi-year pledges without earmarks would provide the UN response with both greater flexibility and stability. Meanwhile, the UN and other aid organisations should continue to seek efficiencies where possible, while redoubling efforts to raise funds from non-traditional donors, particularly Gulf Arab states, which to date have gleaned little.

Bringing funding levels closer to where they were two years ago would deliver a range of important benefits almost immediately, in terms of both ensuring the refugees' dignity and addressing security concerns emanating from the situation. From programs for preventing malnutrition among children – which can stunt their physical and mental development, with life-long consequences – to saving adolescent girls from early marriage, reducing the number of young men forced to work for armed groups to survive and limiting the number of refugees undertaking dangerous trips to countries such as Malaysia, adequate funding is essential. Failing to act not only inflicts harm on Rohingya but also makes little economic sense; it is, for example, much more efficient to prevent severe malnutrition than to treat it.

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<sup>145</sup> The WFP says an average adult requires approximately 2,100 kilocalories per day to “carry out basic body functions”. The \$12 monthly allowance was based on this international standard. The agency notes, however, that this number of calories is “barely an adequate diet”. See “Food and Nutrition Handbook”, World Food Programme, December 2018; and “The 5 Steps from Food Security to Famine”, World Food Programme, 21 December 2021.

<sup>146</sup> Such an event in 2020 brought in around \$600 million in new pledges for humanitarian programs for the Rohingya. “Rohingya conference pledges to ‘remain steadfast’ in finding solutions to crisis”, UN News, 22 October 2020.

Secondly, Dhaka and its partners should take a more realistic approach to prospects for refugee returns. To be sure, the government's focus on repatriation is understandable, and enabling the Rohingya to return to Myanmar should remain the long-term goal – especially since going home once conditions allow appears to remain the refugees' preference. But safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation is all but impossible at present. The security situation in northern Rakhine would mean that any Rohingya who return will be once again at risk of displacement, while Myanmar's failure to make progress on citizenship and other safeguards suggests that the dynamics that drove the Rohingya from Rakhine state in the first place remain unaddressed. If Rohingya return to Myanmar but are then internally displaced or even forced to seek refuge in Bangladesh once more, it would deal a massive blow to future repatriation efforts.

That said, while no one should be coerced or pressured to return, given the desperation in the camps some may still choose to do so under the present process. Their right to return should be respected. In this regard, the UNHCR has a vital role to play in assessing the voluntariness of any potential repatriation and ensuring that refugees have access to accurate, timely information about conditions in northern Rakhine State. Yet even if a few thousand were to return, it would barely make a dent in overall refugee numbers, which grow each year due to an estimated 30,000-plus births in the camps.

With an eye on the horizon, Bangladesh should work to strengthen the possibility of large-scale repatriation taking place in the future. Continued and sustained dialogue with Naypyitaw will be essential, both for communicating Rohingya expectations to Myanmar authorities and for attempting, however difficult the task, to build some level of trust between Myanmar officials and refugees, who have every reason to be wary. Given the evolution Rakhine State has witnessed since the Rohingya exodus, any repatriation at scale would also require the AA's cooperation, which is far from assured. Dhaka has been reluctant to engage the group, but it now has little choice but to initiate informal discussions with the AA to support future efforts at repatriation and to better understand conflict dynamics in Rakhine.<sup>147</sup> Although Dhaka worries about Naypyitaw's reaction, any blowback is unlikely to be significant, particularly if discussions with the AA remain informal. Both Thailand and China have regular contact with Myanmar-based ethnic armed groups along their borders, with the latter openly facilitating peace negotiations.

Dhaka should be more concerned about ensuring that Rohingya armed groups – whether ARSA, RSO or a different entity – do not use its territory to build their strength and launch attacks in Myanmar. Should any group stage a cross-border strike, it would likely reverse the slow but positive progress that the AA has made in improving relations between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities. It would also be disastrous for Dhaka's relations with Naypyitaw. The RSO should thus not be seen as the solution to the security problems in the camps.

Thirdly, Dhaka should allow humanitarian agencies to shift from the expensive emergency response posture in which they have been for more than six years to an

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<sup>147</sup> Dhaka has a longstanding policy of not supporting armed groups that undermine neighbouring states. Crisis Group interviews, June 2019 and November 2023. See also, for example, "Bangladesh: No ARSA, Arakan militant bases in country", Benar News, 9 January 2019.

approach that better aligns with the protracted nature of the crisis and the reality of donor fatigue. Crisis Group urged Dhaka to adopt a more sustainable policy four years ago; the failure to take up this recommendation was not only a missed opportunity but also contributed to the present crisis.<sup>148</sup> At present, the agencies are stuck in an emergency response posture because of Bangladesh's insistence on keeping the near-term prospect of repatriation at the heart of its approach. But Dhaka's stance has the effect of keeping the Rohingya reliant on international aid, which risks creating a downward spiral that will almost certainly hurt the country in the long run. Worsening conditions in the camps will see the Rohingya taking ever riskier steps to survive, often with negative consequences for people in surrounding towns.

A stronger focus on the tools of self-reliance – education (where, as noted, there has been progress), training and employment – would help restore hope for a better future among the youthful refugee population, offer alternatives to violence and crime, and prepare them better for eventual return to Myanmar or resettlement in a third country. By establishing mechanisms through which refugees can work legally, Dhaka would both mitigate the risks associated with informal employment and reduce their reliance on aid. It can also help them meet their many financial needs beyond food that are not covered by international aid, such as mobile phone credit, some health care and education fees, marriage-related costs and more.

The issue is extremely delicate politically, especially with Bangladeshis who see the refugees as unwelcome competitors for jobs, but the sensitivities might be at least partly managed by limiting employment opportunities to sectors where labour demand is not being met. Refugees' desire to work can be harnessed to support the development of the local and national economy. As one study on livelihoods noted, "gains for refugees do not necessarily equate to losses for local Bangladeshis, and loosening restrictions does not necessarily mean opening the door to assimilation".<sup>149</sup> But creative thinking will be needed to identify and pursue opportunities for Rohingya self-reliance that are in Bangladesh's interests.

There are lower-hanging fruit when it comes to livelihoods, however. Rohingya are already running businesses in the camps – from grocery stores and teashops to hairdressers and clothing stores – because international aid does not meet all their consumption needs. These businesses support the Cox's Bazar economy – the goods Rohingya sell are typically purchased locally – but they are technically illegal. Allowing refugees to open shops legally would mitigate the risk of them being shut down during periodic crackdowns and make it more difficult for corrupt security officials to extract bribes. In addition to lifting refugee morale, encouraging self-reliance would have practical benefits. If more Rohingya were allowed to earn an independent income, humanitarian agencies could focus their support on the most vulnerable.<sup>150</sup>

A fourth important step would be for Dhaka to permit multi-year programming, which would enable more efficient operations. Lifting other restrictions designed to stop integration – such as on the type of housing that can be built – would also en-

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<sup>148</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees*, op. cit., Section III.

<sup>149</sup> "Beyond Relief: Securing Livelihoods and Agency", op. cit.

<sup>150</sup> Aid workers highlight that, if refugees were unable to get additional income, either through illegal work or remittances from families abroad, malnutrition rates in the camps would almost certainly be much more severe. Crisis Group interviews, October and November 2023.

sure that available funds go further. But multi-year programming should also open new financing opportunities from donors and other sources, including multilateral bodies. International partners should, in this regard, make clear to Dhaka that they will unlock development funding for the Rohingya and Bangladeshis in the south if they can undertake longer-term projects aimed at building Rohingya self-reliance.

Fifthly, both Dhaka and outside partners should do all they can to capitalise on Dhaka's policy shift allowing third-country resettlement for the first time since 2010. This development is welcome, as it opens another avenue for sustainable solutions. While the impact on absolute numbers will likely be modest no matter how many foreign governments participate, resettlement should be viewed as consequential at both the individual level (given the difference it will make in the lives of those selected) and at the symbolic level as well. By taking concrete measures to alleviate the crisis, foreign donors could improve the climate for discussions with the Bangladeshi government about other sustainable approaches, particularly creating employment opportunities for those who remain in Cox's Bazar. Moving in this direction will require political will on the part of prospective host countries, as well as close engagement with the Bangladeshi authorities to help them overcome the bureaucratic hurdles that have so far hindered this initiative.<sup>151</sup>

Sixthly, the Bangladeshi government urgently needs to work on addressing rising insecurity and violence in the refugee camps. Improved living conditions would undermine the ability of Rohingya armed groups to recruit among the refugee population. But reducing the presence of armed groups will also require an overhaul of the way the camps are policed, with a stronger focus on keeping refugees safe. Bangladesh's Armed Police Battalion not only lacks the resources to do its job properly but is part of the security problem. The corruption of Battalion members and the abuses they regularly perpetrate against the Rohingya mean that most refugees despise the force, which they perceive to be almost as predatory as the armed groups and gangs that it is supposed to be fighting. This mistrust will be a major barrier to reestablishing security in the camps.

Simply turning security over to the more professional Bangladeshi army – as many refugees would like – is not a viable solution, however. Aside from the importance of having a civilian security force in charge, the army is unlikely to agree to the job permanently – and will only get involved if it is in charge. As an interim measure, Bangladesh could establish a joint security mechanism led by the army that includes not only the Armed Police Battalion but also the police and various intelligence forces. Humanitarian actors could support this process by helping develop standard operating procedures for the joint security mechanism. Such procedures would need to be combined with efforts to improve standards in the Armed Police Battalion and weed out bad actors. The aim should be to rebuild trust with refugees to undermine the influence of armed groups. In the meantime, Bangladesh should cooperate with the UN and humanitarian actors to increase the number of protected spaces, such as safe houses, that are available both inside and outside the refugee camps for those at

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<sup>151</sup>The necessary changes include, on the side of recipient countries (particularly the U.S.), building up capacity for receiving refugees. Bangladesh should also issue exit permits more promptly. Crisis Group interviews, October 2023.

particularly high risk from non-state actors. More funding to expand protection services and improve monitoring of protection-related issues would also help.

In conjunction with improved security measures, Bangladeshi authorities should also allow civilian Rohingya leaders to emerge and give greater space to Rohingya-led civil society organisations – and not just those advocating loudly for repatriation. Doing so might help address another issue in the camps: the lack of consultation with the Rohingya, by both the Bangladesh government and humanitarian agencies. At present, most Rohingya feel they have no way to make their voice heard. But for humanitarian officials, deciding who to speak to can be challenging. The *majhis*, for example, were appointed by the Bangladeshi army shortly after the Rohingya arrived and are not necessarily representative of the community; complaints from refugees about corruption and other misbehaviour are common. New Rohingya leadership is needed for the refugee response's next phase.

Finally, there is the matter of organised crime. As long as conflict persists in Myanmar, the Cox's Bazar region is likely to be a hotspot for criminal activity. But the Bangladeshi government could do more to stem the flow of drugs by taking a tougher stand against the leaders of trafficking syndicates. By failing to act against them – including by allowing cases to get bogged down in the legal system – it has for more than a decade tacitly sent a message that crime and corruption are acceptable for those with political connections. Blaming the refugees for the drug trafficking and violence in southern Bangladesh may be politically convenient but belies the complex dynamics that drive the illicit economy.

With national elections scheduled for January 2024, it is unlikely that the Awami League government will be willing to announce major policy changes on the Rohingya in the near term. Winning the high-stakes vote is the government's priority, which means that it will be reticent about adopting policies that might provoke a domestic backlash. The post-election period, however, could offer an opportunity for international actors to initiate constructive conversations with Dhaka about the future of the Rohingya response.

If the Awami League retains power, there is reason to believe it may be more amenable to politically sensitive policy changes. For example, a tailored approach to bringing Rohingya into the work force may be more feasible – both because the government will be less concerned about backlash and because it may well be looking for ways to improve ties with Western governments that are criticising it for the way elections are to be conducted. The opposition BNP, meanwhile, has already signalled that, should it come to power, it would adopt several progressive policies to move the Rohingya response forward sustainably, including allowing them to work, encouraging civilian leadership and fostering dialogue between Rakhine and Rohingya communities (see Section IV). Regardless of how political events unfold in the coming months, international actors, ranging from donors to the UN, should be prepared to make the most of this window when it opens.

Although it will fall to Dhaka to bring about a policy shift, positive changes will also likely require improved coordination and stronger leadership among international actors. Particularly at the embassy level, foreign governments have been too willing to defer responsibility for engaging with Bangladesh on the Rohingya to the UN. The



UN is not always best placed to play this role, however; it often has a difficult relationship with Dhaka, particularly with regard to issues such as repatriation.<sup>152</sup> There is, in other words, a greater likelihood that Dhaka will consider suggestions from international actors if they work together to develop and put forward proposals through a range of channels. Additionally, external actors need to be more willing to raise security issues with Bangladesh, including ways to better protect refugees in the short term. Incorporating Bangladeshi NGOs into advocacy strategies, particularly as concerns the evolution of the refugee response, could also be a useful strategy when engaging with Dhaka.

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<sup>152</sup> The UNHCR's commitment to the principles of safe, voluntary and dignified repatriation often puts it at loggerheads with Dhaka, which wants to press forward with speedy, large-scale returns. More broadly, tension is growing between the UN and the Bangladeshi government because of the deteriorating political and human rights situation in the country.

## **VI. Conclusion**

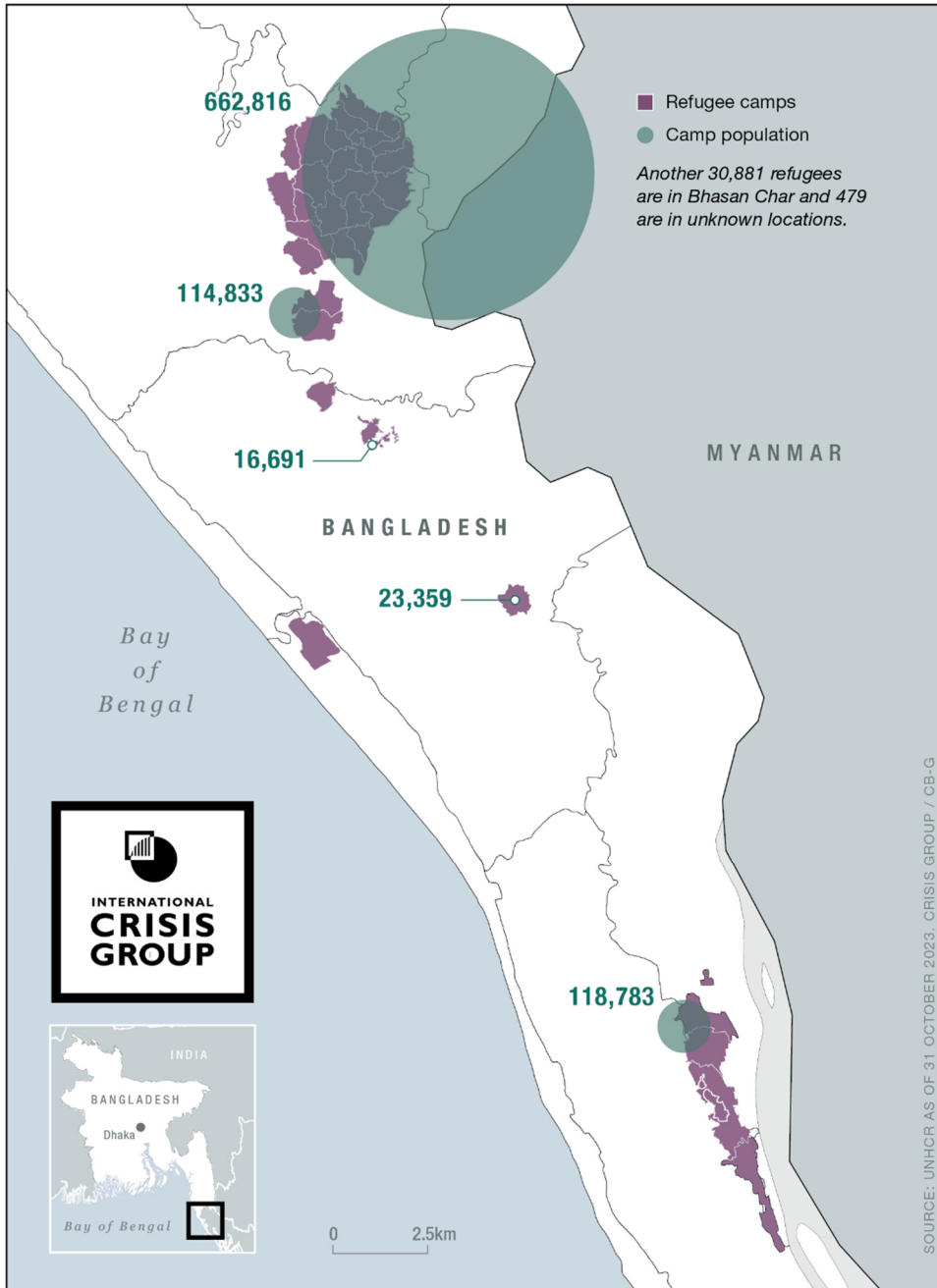
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After more than six years, the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh is at a critical moment. With aid dwindling and violence on the rise, the refugees find themselves in an increasingly dire situation. Yet there is no foreseeable prospect of them being able to return in safety and dignity to Rakhine State, given the discrimination that Rohingya face there and the volatile security situation in much of the state. As a result, the Rohingya are increasingly losing hope for the future and resorting to desperate measures simply to survive.

While repatriation at some point in the future remains the preferred solution to the Rohingya crisis for nearly all parties, the international response needs to evolve to acknowledge the reality of protracted displacement. The onus is primarily on Dhaka, whose current policies drive up the cost of humanitarian activities and keep the Rohingya from being more self-reliant. By working together – and with civilian Rohingya leaders in the camps – Bangladesh and its outside partners can put the Rohingya response back onto a sustainable footing, averting a dangerous spiral into violence and hunger for over a million people from one of the world's most persecuted communities.

**Cox's Bazar/Dhaka/Brussels, 6 December 2023**

Appendix A: Map of Rohingya Refugees in Cox's Bazaar



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

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**December 2023**

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## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2020

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### Special Reports and Briefings

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

*A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022*, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

*7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine*, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

*Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War*, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

*Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023*, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024*, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023.

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### North East Asia

*Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management*, Asia Report N°324, 20 May 2022.

*Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait*, Asia Report N°333, 27 October 2023.

*Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute*, Asia Report N°334, 14 November 2023.

### South Asia

*Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work*, Asia Briefing N°160, 2 March 2020.

*Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, Asia Report N°310, 5 August 2020.

*Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis*, Asia Briefing N°162, 7 August 2020.

*Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace*, Asia Report N°311, 11 August 2020.

*What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?*, Asia Briefing N°165, 13 January 2021.

*Pakistan: Shoring Up Afghanistan's Peace Process*, Asia Briefing N°169, 30 June 2021.

*Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, Asia Report N°317, 6 December 2021.

*Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan*, Asia Report N°320, 4 February 2022.

*Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West*, Asia Report N°321, 14 February 2022.

*Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban*, Asia Report N°326, 12 August 2022 (also available in Dari and Pashto).

*A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan*, Asia Report N°327, 5 September 2022.

*Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis*, Asia Report N°329, 23 February 2023 (also available in Dari and Pashto)..

### South East Asia

*Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form*, Asia Report N°304, 21 January 2020 (also available in Malay and Thai).

*Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, Asia Report N°305, 30 March 2020.

*Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, Asia Report N°306, 14 April 2020.

*Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°161, 19 May 2020.

*An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Report N°307, 9 June 2020.

*Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process*, Asia Report N°308, 19 June 2020.

*COVID-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand*, Asia Report N°309, 4 August 2020.

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*Majority Rules in Myanmar's Second Democratic Election*, Asia Briefing N°163, 22 October 2020 (also available in Burmese).

*From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Briefing N°164, 23 December 2020.

*Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, Asia Briefing N°166, 16 February 2021.

*The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse*, Asia Briefing N°167, 1 April 2021.

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*Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, Asia Report N°314, 18 May 2021.

*Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, Asia Briefing N°168, 28 June 2021.

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*Coming to Terms with Myanmar's Russia Embrace*, Asia Briefing N°173, 4 August 2022.

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*Breaking Gender and Age Barriers amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution*, Asia Briefing N°174, 16 February 2023.

*A Silent Sangha? Buddhist Monks in Post-coup Myanmar*, Asia Report N°330, 10 March 2023.

*A Road to Nowhere: The Myanmar Regime's Stage-managed Elections*, Asia Briefing N°175, 28 March 2023.

*Southern Philippines: Making Peace Stick in the Bangsamoro*, Asia Report N°331, 1 May 2023.

*Southern Thailand's Stop-start Peace Dialogue*, Asia Briefing N°176, 25 May 2023 (also available in Malay and Thai).

*Transnational Crime and Geopolitical Contestation along the Mekong*, Asia Report N°332, 18 August 2023.

*Treading a Rocky Path: The Ta'ang Army Expands in Myanmar's Shan State*, Asia Briefing N°177, 4 September 2023 (also available in Burmese).

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