

BANGLADESH

Rising violence, insecurity, and protection concerns in Cox's Bazar refugee camps

acaps

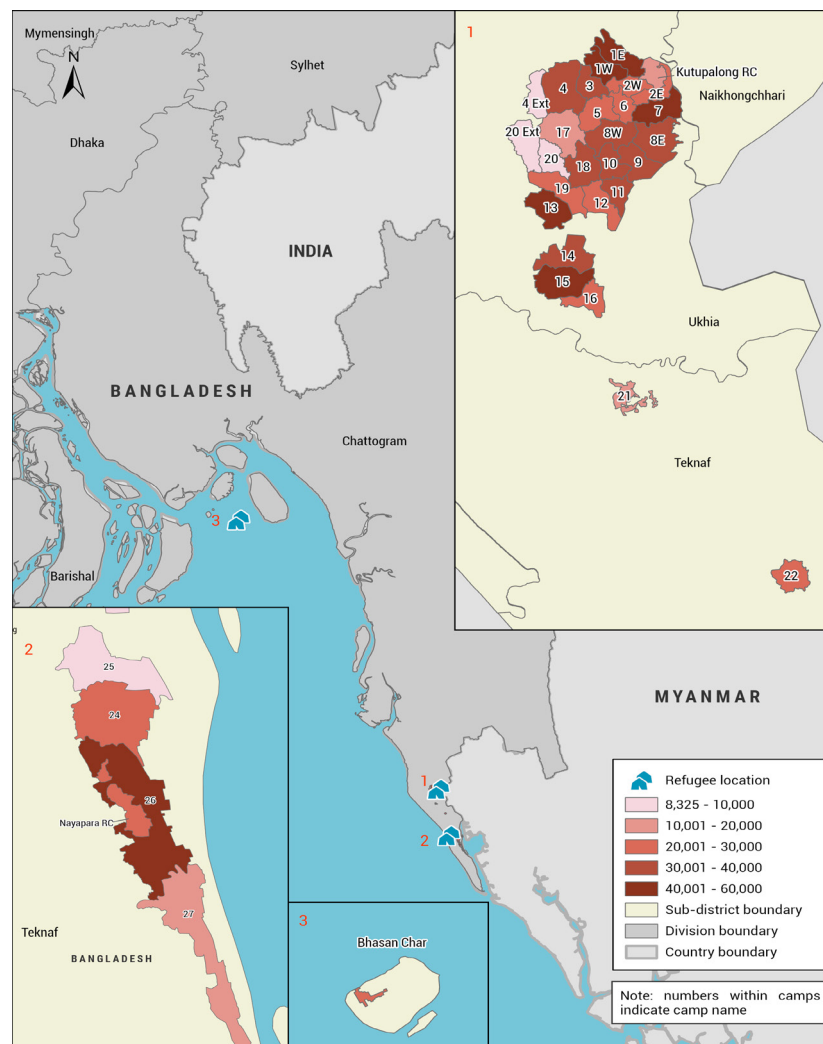
Briefing note
12 May 2023

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

There are about 931,000 registered Rohingya refugees living in the refugee camps of Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas in Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee settlement (UNHCR 11/04/2023 and 08/04/2021). The Kutupalong Balukhali refugee campsite in Ukhiya is the largest and most dense refugee camp in the world, housing more than 630,000 Rohingya refugees (UNHCR 11/04/2023; Better Shelter 18/04/2022). Nearly 30,000 registered Rohingya refugees have been relocated and are living in houses in Bhasan Char, an island off the Bangladeshi coast (UNHCR 11/04/2023; TBS 30/12/2019). All Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar camps and in Bhasan Char rely on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs (ISCG et al. 07/03/2023).

Violence and security incidents inside the Cox's Bazar Rohingya refugee camps have risen since the beginning of 2022 (ACLEDD accessed 31/04/2023; The Daily Star 13/12/2022). This has raised protection concerns for Rohingya refugees, including exposure to general and physical insecurity, child-related protection concerns, and gender-based violence. A lack of livelihood and educational opportunities compound these protection issues, as do funding cuts that drive concerns over food insecurity, making the situation for the Rohingya refugees dire. This has led many refugees to undertake dangerous maritime journeys to reach Malaysia or Indonesia. As at early May 2023, Bhasan Char did not report armed group or gang activity or a rise in crime.

Registered Rohingya Refugees by location



Source: ACAPS using data from UNHCR (11/04/23); ISCG (23/11/2021); ISCG (accessed 11/05/2023); Sentinel Hub (accessed 11/05/2023)

KEY FIGURES

+930,000

REFUGEES IN COX'S
BAZAR CAMPS

60%

OF ALL INCIDENTS
RECORDED IN COX'S
BAZAR CAMPS SINCE
2017 TOOK PLACE IN
2022-2023

At least 16

ROHINGYA COMMUNITY
LEADERS OR
REPRESENTATIVES
KILLED IN 2022 AND 2023
(AS AT 20 APRIL)

FUNDING AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

UN agencies
(UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM,
UNFPA, WFP, inter alia)

INGOs
(BRAC, RI, ACTED, SCI,
OXFAM, and more [here](#))

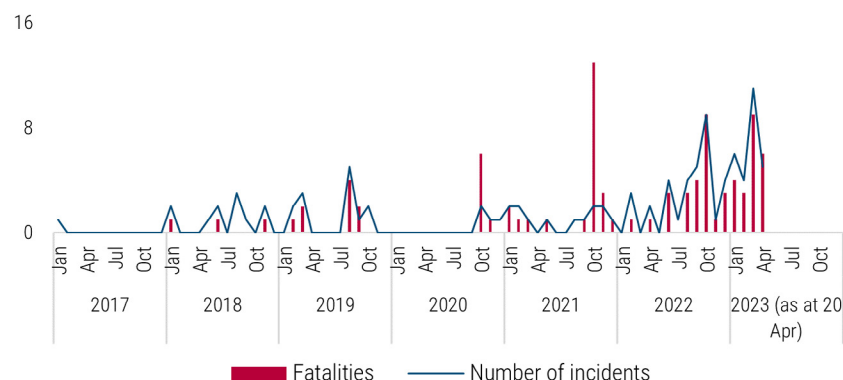
NGOs
(ACLAB, Adhikar, Agrajatra,
and more [here](#))

Government authorities

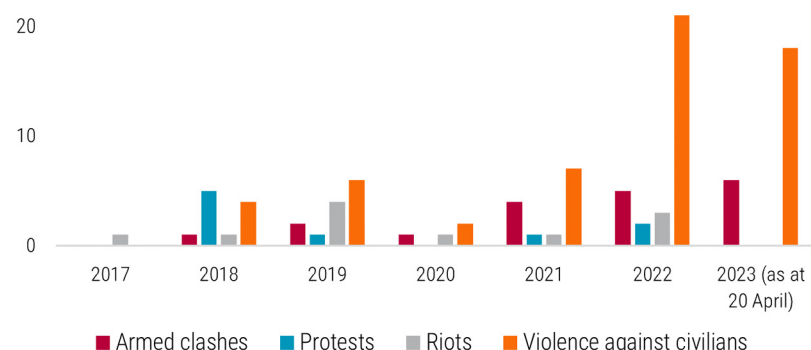


TRENDS IN VIOLENCE AND SECURITY INCIDENTS

Number of violence and security incidents and fatalities



Types of violence and security incidents



Source: ACAPS using data from ACLED (accessed 31/04/2023)

Disclaimer: ACLED does not collect all violence and security incidents, so they do not record some incidents, such as personal crimes (ACLED 01/2021). ACAPS only considered incidents related to or involving the Rohingya refugees in Ukha and Teknaf until 20 April 2023. A few of the incidents took place outside the refugee camps.

Around 60% of the violence and security incidents since 2017 had taken place from 2022 until 20 April 2023. Since 2021, the number of clashes between armed groups and gangs and between armed groups or gangs and Bangladeshi security forces have increased, peaking within less than four months in 2023. ACLED data also revealed a similar but still increasing trend for violence against civilians (ACLED accessed 31/04/2023). Crimes such as murder, kidnapping, rape, robbery, human trafficking, arson, and illicit drug trade have soared in the Rohingya refugee camps in recent years (Reuters 24/01/2023; The Daily Star 13/12/2022).

DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE AND INSECURITY

Increased armed group and gang activity

There are at least ten active armed groups and gangs in the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar. A few are Rohingya armed groups, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), operating on both sides of the Bangladesh-Myanmar border; others are gangs involved in illicit activities, such as extortion and kidnapping (Prothom Alo 27/02/2023; DT 06/03/2023; The Daily Star 15/02/2023). The rise in violence and security incidents since early 2022 is mostly because of increased armed group and gang activity, including competition in establishing control of illicit activities. This increase has resulted in property and infrastructure destruction and killings (The Daily Star 13/12/2022; TNH 30/03/2023; ACLED accessed 31/04/2023).

Bangladeshi authorities reported 222 fire incidents in the camps from 2021–2022. Among them, 60 were classified as sabotage, and the cause of 63 were unknown. Some of these incidents burnt down facilities, such as learning centres, hospitals, and refugee homes. Some of the fire incidents resulted from armed groups and gangs trying to seize control of rival territories (New Age 06/03/2023; The Daily Star 13/12/2022; TNH 30/03/2023).

Bangladeshi authorities also reported that it is impossible to carry out regular patrol and surveillance activities in the 'zero line', a buffer zone along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Armed group members use the space to conduct activities such as training, controlling drug smuggling operations, and carrying out armed attacks (Prothom Alo 27/02/2023; The Daily Star 15/02/2023).

Increased illicit drug trade across the border

The post-coup conflict in Myanmar and the lack of funds have weakened the counter-drug enforcement capacity inside the country. This situation has created space for transnational criminal organisations to develop their activities. Armed groups are capitalising on the



flourishing cross-border illicit drug trade and arms smuggling and have started to fight among themselves and with security forces to establish control over the trade (The Daily Star 13/12/2022; The Diplomat 02/02/2022; FT 21/08/2021).

Targeted killings

A large number of killings in the Rohingya camps between 2022 and 20 April 2023 were of Rohingya community leaders. Armed assailants killed at least 16 Rohingya community leaders or representatives during this period, more than three times than in the 2017–2021 period (ACLEDA accessed 31/04/2023).

Human rights groups argue that community leaders' work towards repatriating refugees and campaigning for the Rohingya's rights, safety, and wellbeing make them targets of violence. Local media have also reported that gangs targeted many of those killed for assisting the police in combating illicit activities (The Daily Star 13/12/2022).

Armed group and gang recruitment

Media sources report that the most active armed group in the Rohingya refugee camps, ARSA, has been losing its foothold in Rakhine state (Myanmar) since Myanmar's military operations targeted ARSA's training camps and caused the mass exodus of Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh in 2017. This change has deprived ARSA of access to the state's disenfranchised Rohingya population base. As a result, ARSA has largely shifted its recruitment and sustainment activities to the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. Other armed groups and gangs are also actively recruiting in the camps. Recruitment is often conducted by imposing fear on and coercing refugees (The Diplomat 24/01/2022; The Daily Star 04/11/2022).

CRISIS IMPACT

Child protection needs: the proliferation of armed groups and gangs is leading to the recruitment of unemployed young men and boys to conduct illicit activities. The armed groups' provision of remunerations, along with a lack of education and livelihood opportunities and increasing food insecurity, pushes people and children to join the armed groups. The camps' poor living conditions also push people, including children, to look for work outside the refugee camps in Bangladesh, with some even looking for jobs in other countries. Work outside the refugee camps comes with a heightened risk of trafficking or exploitation from criminal networks (The Daily Star 22/02/2023; and 05/11/2022).

Sexual exploitation and abuse: the proliferation of armed group and gang activity has also increased reports of sexual and gender-based violence in the camps. Women in refugee camps are reporting incidents of harassment, attacks, kidnapping, and extortion from people affiliated with armed groups and gangs. Such groups also obstruct Rohingya women from working outside their homes or studying. The situation that the Rohingya women are facing in the camps has caused psychological issues, such as depression, anxiety, stress, and fear. They also report often not seeking psychosocial counselling from NGOs because of the risk of attacks on their way to the clinics. Human traffickers and smugglers also target these vulnerable women and girls who are often desperate to leave the camps for neighbouring countries, especially Malaysia and Thailand. Rohingya women also report the lack of formal justice systems that lead to crimes usually going unpunished (LSE 06/02/2023; Prothom Alo 11/11/2021).

Maritime crossings: more than 3,500 Rohingya in 39 boats attempted dangerous sea crossings in 2022, mainly from Myanmar and Bangladesh. This figure is five times the number of crossings attempted in 2021. The Rohingya who start their journeys by boat usually intend to reach Malaysia or Indonesia, where they believe they will have better living conditions. Reports indicate that there have been further sea crossings in 2023 (UN 17/01/2023; The Guardian 18/01/2023; TBS 08/01/2023). The combination of a lack of livelihood and educational opportunities, rising food insecurity and malnutrition concerns, poor living conditions, inadequate access to health and WASH facilities, and surging crime, violence, and insecurity in the Rohingya refugee camps is pushing refugees to undertake risky, and often deadly, sea journeys in unsuitable boats. Some refugees state that it is better to undertake sea journeys than to endure the current situation in refugee camps or go back to Myanmar. Reports indicate that human traffickers have increased their operations and are continuously looking for refugees willing to cross the sea to other countries, especially Malaysia. The recent surge in violence and insecurity and an aid funding shortfall will further push the refugees to undertake risky sea journeys as a last resort (Al Jazeera 17/03/2023; The Daily Star 18/01/2023; DT 26/01/2023; TGP 12/03/2023).

Shelter needs and housing, land, and property (HLP) rights for the Rohingya refugees: the rise in violence and security incidents have reduced HLP rights for Rohingya refugees, as their homes and property have become increasingly unsafe. The burning and subsequent damage and destruction of refugees' homes and personal belongings mark the overall reduced access (World Vision accessed 07/05/2023; UNICEF 25/03/2021; The Daily Star 11/09/2022).



HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

- The Rohingya humanitarian response plan has been chronically underfunded. This has constrained the capacity of humanitarian organisations to provide sufficient aid and services to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In 2022, funding only reached around 63% of the humanitarian response plan (TGP 13/03/2023; UNHCR 09/2022; OCHA accessed 07/05/2023).
- National and international NGOs face several challenges regarding the formation, registration, and implementation of activities because of bureaucratic hurdles. These include requiring an inordinately high minimum number of members to form an NGO, complicated registration and administrative processes resulting in delays, obstructions in the disbursement of foreign funds, delays in project approval, and the cancellation of registration (ICNL accessed 01/05/2023).
- Rohingya refugees face movement restrictions in the camps, and reports show that there has been an escalation of harassment at checkpoints. The refugees are also prohibited from leaving the camps (HRW 17/01/2023 and 04/04/2022).
- Security forces set up checkpoints en route to the refugee camps, and these security checks may cause delays in the provision of humanitarian assistance.
- Although aid workers, security forces, and other authorities are present in the camps during the day, armed groups and gangs tend to take control at night (Prothom Alo 11/11/2021; The Daily Star 07/12/2021).

AGGRAVATING OR COMPOUNDING FACTORS

Monsoon season

Rohingya refugee shelters in the Cox's Bazar camps are mostly self-built makeshift huts of bamboo, sticks, and low-grade plastic sheeting (Global Shelter Cluster 30/08/2021). They are vulnerable to natural hazards and monsoon season events, usually from May–October. These events include strong winds, cyclones, heavy monsoon rains, floods, and landslides. Many refugees face shelter damage or destruction during the monsoon season, resulting in displacement and the need for shelter repair assistance (WB accessed 30/04/2023; UNHCR 30/07/2021; The Guardian 07/08/2021). With the lack of access to adequate WASH and health facilities in Cox's Bazar, this added challenge could cause an increase in health risks, such as the spread of waterborne diseases (e.g. acute watery diarrhoea and cholera).

Food aid cuts

Around 45% of Rohingya refugee families in the camps do not have the resources to eat a balanced diet, leading to widespread malnutrition in the camps. 12% of the children in the camps suffer from global acute malnutrition. Around 40% of the children in the camps have chronic malnutrition, affecting their growth, and 40% of pregnant and breastfeeding women are anaemic (WFP 17/02/2023). Citing a budget shortfall, the WFP announced a 17% cut in food rations from March, bringing the caloric intake per person below the accepted minimum standard of 2,100 calories per day and increasing food insecurity concerns (MSF 02/03/2023; Al Jazeera 07/03/2023). Despite some of the contributions to this area of response, there is still a significant funding gap to meet the food and nutritional needs of the Rohingya refugee population (U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh 10/04/2023). The ration cut will likely affect pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and children the most (TGP 12/03/2023). The rising price of commodities is likely to compound the aid cut.

Low likelihood of voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity

Bangladesh and Myanmar have undertaken some initiatives in 2023 to repatriate the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar. The international community and the Rohingya consider repatriation under the current conditions in Rakhine not safe or sustainable (FE 19/03/2023; The Daily Star 31/03/2023; Al Jazeera 23/03/2023). The temporary truce between the Arakan Army and the military junta in Myanmar is volatile, and tensions have risen between the two groups in the past few months. There have also been occasional reports of tension flare-ups between the Rohingya community in Rakhine and the Arakan Army in 2023 (CASS 20/04/2023). The safe and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees seems unlikely given the current unstable situation in Rakhine.

High population density in the Rohingya camps

The population density in the Rohingya camps has reached as high as 60,000 people per km², making some of the camps among the most densely populated in the world (WFP 02/06/2022; UNHCR 13/07/2022). The high density poses numerous challenges, particularly regarding hygiene, health, and protection. Hazards such as outbreaks of fire within the camps and monsoon flooding compound these conditions (BHRN 08/02/2022; Islam and Yunus 25/06/2020; DT 01/02/2023). Around 30,000–35,000 newborns are reported in the Rohingya refugee camps per year, nearly double that of Bangladesh. This birth rate increases the number of vulnerable people in the camps and the population density, making the camps more overcrowded and further worsening hygiene conditions (New Age 11/04/2022; Prothom Alo 22/08/2022; WB accessed 01/05/2023). The high birth rate and changes in the age structure call for a redesigned response strategy to address needs such as basic services, education, and employment skills training (The Daily Star 17/02/2023).

Lack of livelihood opportunities

Rising food insecurity concerns compound the lack of livelihood opportunities. These issues push the refugees to adopt negative coping mechanisms, such as early marriage and sex work. Families marry off their children, especially daughters, to “reduce the number of mouths to feed”. More women and girls may resort to prostitution, exposing them to violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse (The Atlantic 14/12/2017; Prothom Alo 07/06/2022; TBS 14/03/2023; BBC 20/03/2018; The Daily Star 07/09/2022).

Impact of the prolonged stay of the Rohingya refugees and host community perceptions

The prolonged stay of the Rohingya refugees has had a significant impact on the host community, including rising commodity prices in local markets, reduced groundwater availability, deforestation and contamination of agricultural lands, reduced wage rate and demand for labour, lack of healthcare, and increased gender-based violence (FE 19/12/2022). The host community perceives increased violence, insecurity, and social ills, such as human and drug trafficking inside and outside the camps, as a result of the prolonged presence of refugees. The host community has reported that although they initially provided aid for the refugees, they believe that the refugees have already received sufficient aid, making them frustrated by the continued arrival of international assistance (USIP 12/04/2022; IRI 08/2022). Conflict between the host community and the refugees has been very limited, but the impact on the host community and their perceptions towards the refugees could lead to greater conflict, especially if their grievances are left unaddressed (USIP 12/04/2022).