

Developments related to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

March 23 - March 29, 2020



REFUGEE SOLIDARITY
NETWORK

Highlights:

COVID-19:

- There has been one confirmed case of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar, but none yet in the Rohingya camps.
- Bangladesh has decided to shut all government and private offices and courts from March 26 to April 4 amid mounting fears of the coronavirus that has infected 33 people and killed three.
- All activities, except for emergency services, have been suspended at all 34 Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar from Wednesday in a bid to fight the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.
- Rights activists this week have called on the government of Bangladesh to lift the telecommunications ban in Cox's Bazar, as the lack of network severely hinders aid groups from being able to provide information and services to refugees in the camps.

Repatriation:

- About 650 Rohingya refugees have returned to Myanmar from Bangladesh through informal channels, despite a repatriation agreement signed by both countries in 2017.

Developments:

[Inclusive approach a must to contain coronavirus in Rohingya camps: ISCG](#) New Age Bangladesh (March 29)

The Inter Sector Coordination Group has stressed the need for taking an inclusive and coordinated approach to increase isolation and treatment capacities to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Rohingya camps and in the host communities in Cox's Bazar district. No case of COVID-19 was reported so far in Rohingya camps, while there was one confirmed case in the local community in Cox's Bazar, according to the ISCG, which includes UN agencies, and local, national and international NGOs working for the Rohingya people in Bangladesh and the host communities. ISCG senior coordinator Nicole Epting also stressed the need for avoiding discrimination among the Rohingya people and the host communities in extending the services.

[4 'yaba traders' killed in Cox's Bazar 'gunfights' with BGB, police](#) The Daily Star (March 28)

Four alleged yaba traders were killed in separate "gunfights" with Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and police in Teknaf upazila of Cox's Bazar district. Of the incidents, three people -- supposedly from the Rohingya community -- were killed in a "gunfight" with the BGB in Hnila Union and another with the police in Whykong union.

['Just one case of COVID-19 may spread like wildfire in Rohingya camp'](#) Prothom Alo (March 28)

Bangladesh, which has reported 48 cases of the virus and five deaths, imposed a lockdown on Tuesday, the same day it confirmed the first case in Cox's Bazar, the coastal district where the Rohingya camps are located. As the coronavirus forces the world's big cities and wealthiest countries into lockdown, a potential humanitarian catastrophe threatens tens of millions of people crowded into refugee camps and makeshift settlements for displaced people from

Bangladesh to Syria and across Africa, where healthcare and clean water is often scarce, sanitation is poor, illnesses are rife and social distancing is almost impossible.

[Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar brace for the COVID-19 pandemic](#) The Sentinel Project (March 27)

As the COVID-19 virus affects more and more countries around the world – 199 countries to date – questions are starting to be raised about the preparedness of the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh for the onset of the pandemic. Although cases have already been reported in Bangladesh, there are not yet any official cases in the camps near the city of Cox's Bazar. There is, however, much reason for concern. It is becoming widely apparent that even well-established healthcare systems in countries of the Global North are struggling to manage the volume of COVID-19 patients, which calls into question how low-income countries will cope, especially if they host large numbers of refugees. Refugee camps are particularly vulnerable to viruses since people live in close proximity and likely have previous underlying health conditions while the sites lack suitable infrastructure for combating the spread of disease. There are several key reasons why the Cox's Bazaar refugee camps are particularly vulnerable: housing without potable water and running water for toilets, lack of access to adequate healthcare and a potential shortage in medical supplies and testing capabilities, and lack of access to information.

[USCIRF Alarmed by Worsening Conditions in Rakhine State Following International Court Ruling](#) USCIRF (March 27)

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed its alarm over the deteriorating conditions and continued violence in Rakhine State following the January 23, 2020 provisional ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). "Following the ICJ provisional ruling, we have been dismayed by the worsening conditions in Rakhine and neighboring Chin State," USCIRF Vice Chair Nadine Maenza stated. "We are, in particular, alarmed by the internet blackout that began last month and the increase in military operations and attacks against civilians. The internet blackout is limiting civilians' access to humanitarian aid or contact with family members and curtailing civil society's ability to monitor and report on the on-going abuses of the Burmese military."

[Gambia's genocide case against Myanmar shows that smaller countries can also help balance the scales of international justice](#) Equal Times (March 27)

After years of intense persecution, the Rohingya minority population in Myanmar finally had their calls for help answered in a landmark judgment earlier this year by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which ordered the government to take immediate measures to prevent further acts of genocide. The fact that the complainant was Gambia, mainland Africa's smallest country, 11,000 kilometres away on the western Atlantic coast, has set an important precedent for south-south solidarity against human rights violations. At a time when wealthier nations appear to be taking less responsibility for intervening against human rights abuses by other nations, there is a growing need for similar interventions of solidarity.

[Covid- 19: A wake-up call](#) Dhaka Tribune (March 27)

[op-ed] While people in some countries are stockpiling, panic buying, and fighting over toilet paper, others are fighting to stay alive. In refugee camps such as the Rohingya camp in Bangladesh, where self-isolation or social distancing are not a viable option, the consequences of an outbreak are unimaginable. This is an enemy that defies borders and boundaries; does not care about race, religion, or ethnicity; does not discriminate between the rich, the powerful, or the poor, and has no allegiances. The challenges of containing and stopping Covid-19 are unprecedented. The way forward is to share information, knowledge, and resources. We as a race are not known for learning quickly from our mistakes, but now would be a good time to start. Covid-19 has been the mother of all wake-up calls.

[Rohingyas' plight & ICC probe: Myanmar's crime against humanity](#) Daily Times (March 26)

[op-ed] Recently, the ICC without any shadow of doubts, has declared that The Hague based Court of war crimes exercises jurisdiction over crimes where part of the alleged criminal conduct takes place on the territory of a state party, the ICC has extended its international law-enforcement role. Yet, in terms of international law, the Myanmar case is unique in that it bilaterally involved the jurisdiction of the ICJ and the ICC because the ICJ adjudicates the case concerning the disputes between the states while the ICC entertains the complaints regarding the crime against humanity and genocide. By all reasonable accounts, the international human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law are applicable in Rohingyas' case who have been subjected to Genocide. Though in the Court of

law, the offence of Genocide seems a difficult task to be proved by the Gambian legal team, the World Court decision makes a good start on the primacy of international law.

Similar:

[The folly of Aung San Suu Kyi's 'bad apple' defence](#) East Asia Forum (Mar. 26)

[US President Trump, Ambassador Miller greet Bangladesh](#) United News Bangladesh (March 26)

US President Donald Trump and US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl R Miller congratulated Bangladesh in separate messages for the birth centennial of Father of Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and ahead of Bangladesh's 49th year of independence. Trump said Bangladesh has progressed along an enviable development arc, rising from a devastating war to become a country that is now growing into an agricultural and industrial power house over the past 49 years. Appreciating Bangladesh's continued generosity as a host to over one million Rohingya refugees, Trump said they will continue to stand by Bangladesh in responding to this crisis as a leading international donor.

[Unprepared for the Worst: World's Most Vulnerable Brace for Virus](#) New York Times (March. 26)

In an embattled enclave in Syria, doctors have seen patients die from what looks like the coronavirus but are unable to treat them because they lack beds, protective gear and medical professionals. A refugee camp in Bangladesh is so cramped that its population density is nearly four times that of New York City, making social distancing impossible. Clinics in a refugee camp in Kenya struggle in normal times with only eight doctors for nearly 200,000 people. As wealthy countries like the United States and Italy struggle with mass outbreaks of the coronavirus, international health experts and aid workers are increasingly worried that the virus could ravage the world's most vulnerable people: the tens of millions forced from their homes by violent conflict. The coronavirus, which has already infected hundreds of thousands of people around the globe, could rip through [refugee] camps with devastating speed and mortality. So far, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases among refugees is low, but that may be the result of a lack of testing. Doctors treating refugees in Syria and Bangladesh say that in recent weeks they have treated and lost patients with symptoms consistent with the virus.

Similar:

[Fears grow over coronavirus outbreak devastating refugees, civilians trapped by war](#) ABC News (Mar. 27)

[If coronavirus spreads to this population, it could be catastrophic](#) CNN (Mar. 24)

[No Safe Place: Refugees and the Coronavirus](#) Psychology Today (Mar. 28)

[South Asia: As COVID-19 spreads, fears rise for people at higher risk](#) Amnesty International (March 26)

As cases of COVID-19 escalate in South Asia, one of the world's poorest and most populous regions, Amnesty International calls on the authorities there to put human rights at the heart of their responses and intensify efforts to protect marginalized and vulnerable groups at higher risk, including daily wage earners, people displaced by conflict, health workers and prisoners. The COVID-19 crisis in South Asia has been exacerbated by a failure of the authorities in South Asia to provide accessible, accurate and evidence-based information about the virus, how people can protect themselves, and what the government is doing to help them. In Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar District, where the first case of COVID-19 was reported this week, the failure to provide Rohingya refugees with accurate information about the virus has stirred alarming rumours in the camps that anyone who contracts it will be put to death by the authorities. The camps have been subject to an ongoing telecommunications blackout. Authorities across South Asia have a responsibility towards not just their own citizens, but all individuals within their jurisdictions – including refugees and asylum-seekers.

[Bangladesh: Internet Ban Risks Rohingya Lives](#) Human Rights Watch (March 26)

The Bangladesh government's internet blackout and phone restrictions at Rohingya refugee camps are obstructing humanitarian groups from addressing the COVID-19 threat. The shutdown is risking the health and lives of over a million people, including nearly 900,000 refugees in Cox's Bazar and the Bangladeshi host community by hindering aid



groups' ability to provide emergency health services and rapidly coordinate essential preventive measures. Aid workers and community leaders rely on WhatsApp and other internet-based communication tools to coordinate emergency services and share important information in the camps. The shutdown prevents effective dissemination of coronavirus information as well as impeding aid workers' ability to conduct "contact tracing" to contain transmission of the virus.

Similar:

[Rohingya refugees need a coronavirus lifeline, not an internet ban](#) The New Humanitarian (Mar. 24) [op-ed]
[COVID-19: UN, Rights Watchdog Want Internet Restored at Rohingya Camps](#) Radio Free Asia (Mar. 27)
[A Rohingya Coronavirus Catastrophe Looms if Their Internet Blackout Continues](#) The Diplomat (Mar. 27)

[Virus panic grips Rohingya camps in Bangladesh](#) France24 (March 25)

The conditions in the camps in Cox's Bazar are fertile ground for any disease. The public in other countries are being told to keep two metres (six feet) apart. That is the width of most paths in Kutapalong, the world's biggest refugee camp with 600,000 Rohingya, that are clogged each day with people out on the daily hunt for food and fuel. Masks that have become a daily essential in much of the world are rarely seen. Sanitizer is unheard of. Social distancing is "virtually impossible" in the camps, Bangladesh head of Doctors Without Borders Paul Brockman said. "The scale of the challenge is immense. Vulnerable populations such as the Rohingya will likely be disproportionately affected by COVID-19," the illness caused by new coronavirus, he has said. The Rohingya barely know about the disease as the government cut off most internet since late last year under measures to clamp down on the refugees. "We are extremely worried. If the virus reaches here, it will spread like wildfire," said Rohingya community leader Mohammad Jubayer. Camp resident Lokman Hakim, 50, expressed deep concern at the lack of preventive measures in the camps. "We have received soap and been told to wash our hands. And that's it," Hakim said. Another community leader, Sayed Ullah, said there was "much ignorance and misinformation" about the virus because of the internet shutdown.

Similar:

[Coronavirus fear runs high in Bangladesh refugee camps](#) UCA News (Mar. 27)

[Opinion: COVID-19 and the Rohingya refugee crisis](#) Thompson Reuters (March 24)

[op-ed] All around the world, the coronavirus numbers are climbing. Each day sees thousands of new cases and lives lost. In Cox's Bazar we have been watching the world and holding our breath for the first confirmed case of COVID-19. And now it's happened. With reports of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar, it's just a matter of time until the virus reaches the vulnerable population living in cramped conditions in the largest refugee settlement on earth. Thousands of people could die. As global life grinds to a halt in a bid to contain the coronavirus, we must remember that for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, their lives have already been in limbo for years, it is their status quo. Life in a refugee camp should never be considered an acceptable long-term solution. The coronavirus is a warning to us that we don't have endless time to resolve the issues in Myanmar that would finally allow the Rohingya to return home. We are now witnessing the impact that coronavirus is having in communities with strong health systems where people can social distance and wash hands, yet this virus has still brought them to their knees. In the densely packed camps of Cox's Bazar, options for social distancing or self-isolation are remote. Even simple hygiene practices such as regular hand-washing become complicated when access to clean water is severely limited. The coronavirus has exposed how our systems fail the most vulnerable. Our global mechanisms for accountability and the protection of human rights have failed the Rohingya so far – it is absolutely essential that we do not fail them again.

Similar:

[Where will coronavirus pandemic leave Rohingya refugees now living in packed Bangladesh camps?](#) South China Morning Post (Mar. 29.) [op-ed]

[Coronavirus: Critical services only in Rohingya camps since Wednesday](#) Dhaka Tribune (March 24)

All activities, except for emergency services, will be suspended at all 34 Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar from Wednesday in a bid to fight the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research has confirmed a total of 39 coronavirus cases in the country. All gatherings, including religious ones, [are] barred, and camp residents have been asked to pray at home rather than in mosques. RRRC Talukder, the top government official on the ground in relation to the Rohingya crisis, also said: "Schools and madrasas will also remain closed. "The message is very clear; always stay at home for the security of yourself and others." RRRC Talukder also said that apart from those involved with emergency services, no one would be allowed to go out of the camps and come in.

Similar:

[Bangladesh limits Rohingya camp activities](#) New Age Bangladesh (Mar. 26)

[Government to take low income people to Bhashan Char](#) New Age Bangladesh (March 24)

The government instructed all district administrations to send people from low income groups to Bhashan Char in Noakhali to make use of the island's facilities, initially built to relocate Rohingya refugees there. Residential and other facilities were built in the island at the cost of Tk 2500 crore to relocate over 1,00,000 forcibly-displaced Rohingya people of Myanmar to ease overcrowdings at camps in Cox's Bazar and Bandarban. 'The government has built residential and livelihood facilities in Bhashan Char. People willing to relocate there are called to avail these facilities,' cabinet secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam said at a press conference. The press conference was held at the Bangladesh Secretariat to announce the government's measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic. The call was made as a part of the government's programme called 'return to home' facilitating transfer of the low income people incapable to maintain their livelihood in urban areas to rural areas.

[Bangladesh to shut all offices from Mar 26 to Apr 4](#) BDNews24 (March 23)

Bangladesh has decided to shut all government and private offices and courts from March 26 to April 4 amid mounting fears of the coronavirus that has infected 33 people and killed three. The shutdown will not affect emergency services such as hospital and Fire Service and Civil Defence. Public transport will operate on a limited scale during the holidays. Schools, colleges and all other educational institutions had already been shut until Mar 31.

Similar:

[Bangladesh declares 10-days of holiday to curb coronavirus spread](#) Outlook India (Mar. 23)

[Coronavirus: Bangladesh declares 10-day nationwide holiday](#) The Hindu (Mar. 23)

[Govt readies testing lab for possible outbreak in Rohingya camps](#) Dhaka Tribune (March 23)

The government has kept a testing lab ready in Cox's Bazar to identify and treat the Rohingya and other citizens if any infections are reported in the coastal district. Initiatives have already been taken to avoid public gathering in the district, said Dr Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) while briefing the press via videoconference. Both the government and international agencies are putting great emphasis on placing preventive measures in the refugee camps since it will be very difficult to deal with a situation that may arise from any infection. So far, no Rohingya have been found with symptoms of the coronavirus infection in any of the 34 camps.

[Sheikh Thani Bin Abdullah makes the largest individual contribution ever in support of UNHCR](#) UNHCR (March 23)

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the Thani Bin Abdullah Bin Thani Al-Thani Humanitarian Fund have announced Sheikh Thani's largest contribution so far to UNHCR. More than US\$43 million, channelled through four separate agreements, will fund UNHCR's work in support of refugees and displaced people in Yemen, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Chad. The third part of the donation will be implemented in Bangladesh's Cox Bazar refugee settlements. The aim is to help create sustainable and dignified living conditions for some 84,000 Rohingya refugees and members of the host communities. This year's donation is the largest ever individual contribution to UNHCR.



Similar:

[Qatari Emir Provides Record \\$43Mln To Aid Refugees in Yemen, Lebanon, Bangladesh – UNHCR Urdu Point](#)
(Mar. 23)

[Coronavirus: Resorts requisitioned for quarantine facilities in Cox's Bazar](#) Dhaka Tribune (March 23)

The authorities have requisitioned resorts in Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya upazila in order to set up quarantine centres in their premises in a bid to combat the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Three resorts – Pebble Stone Resort, La Bella Resort and Royal Stone Resort – have been selected for 150 beds to be placed in them to keep coronavirus patients in institutional quarantine. Meanwhile, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) confirmed as of Monday a total of 33 coronavirus cases in the country.

[The Next Wave](#) Foreign Policy (March 23)

The United Nations is preparing to issue a major funding appeal for more than \$1.5 billion to prepare for outbreaks of the new coronavirus in areas suffering some of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, including Gaza, Myanmar, Syria, South Sudan, and Yemen. U.N. and private relief officials expect it will be a major struggle to convince wealthy governments to open their pocketbooks. "Some of the biggest donors are seeing global recession about to hit them," said one senior relief official. "How generous are they going to be when they have a crisis looming in their own backyards?" As the arc of the pathogen spreads from global capitals to war zones and refugee camps, U.N. relief officials and aid organizations are bracing for what they fear could be a cataclysmic second phase of the pandemic: spreading in the close-quarters encampments of the world's more than 25 million refugees and another 40 million internally displaced people. More than 3 billion people lack access to hand-washing facilities, depriving them of one of the most effective first lines of defense against the spread of the coronavirus, according to UNICEF. There is little hope of finding enough space to implement social distancing policies in overcrowded camps from Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar and Kenya's Dadaab camp to an archipelago of refugee camps for Afghans, Syrians, Palestinians, and others throughout the Middle East. [Other key limitations identified in the article include: political sanctions, restrictive funding models, and the countervailing interest to protect the staff of international organizations.]

Similar:

[Anticipating the next waves of COVID-19](#) The Hill (Mar. 29) [op-ed]

[Refugees, Shantytowns in Middle-East, North Africa Endangers Global Public Health: OpEd](#) The Eurasian Times
(Mar. 24) [op-ed]

[Rohingya refugees return to Myanmar amid repatriation disputes with Bangladesh](#) Channel News Asia (March 23)

[video] About 650 Rohingya refugees have returned to Myanmar from Bangladesh through informal channels, despite a repatriation agreement signed by both countries in 2017. Attempts at repatriation have failed as the Rohingyas say their security is not guaranteed upon return.

[4 Rohingyas of the same family quarantined in Teknaf](#) The Daily Star (March 23)

Four members of a Rohingya family have been quarantined after they arrived in Leda Camp (No 24) in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf upazila. They had illegally entered Bangladesh from India. A 10-month old infant is among those quarantined.

[Saudi to continue support for Bangladesh, says envoy](#) United News Bangladesh (March 23)

The Saudi government will continue to extend its support to accelerate the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh alongside the Rohingya issue. Newly appointed Saudi Ambassador to Bangladesh Essa Yousef Essa Al duhailan said this when he presented his credentials to President Abdul Hamid at Bangabhaban.



[Covid-19 in Rohingya camps: Lack of tests, ICUs, skilled medical staff a major challenge](#) Dhaka Tribune (March 23)
Amid the growing concerns about public safety due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, insufficient essential resources are posing a great risk as far as preventing the spread of the deadly disease in the cramped Rohingya camps is concerned. Lack of testing facilities, intensive care units (ICU) and skilled medical professionals in both the Rohingya camps and the Cox's Bazar district remain a major challenge in preventing the coronavirus infection in the refugee settlements, according to the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), the coordinating body of humanitarian organizations, including the United Nations agencies, working in relation to the Rohingya crisis. No case of coronavirus infection has been traced in Cox's Bazar yet – including all 34 Rohingya camps in the district. Communication is the key to timely and effective management of this situation, said the ISCG, calling for the government to lift the restrictions on mobile data communications in the Rohingya camps. Ease of humanitarian access must be ensured throughout the response to Covid -19, including access of humanitarian staff into the camps, and refugees' access to services.

In compiling this digest, RSN has attempted to include the most relevant news accounts from the past week concerning Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. From time to time, news beyond Bangladesh or the Rohingya community is included, but currently RSN does not have the capacity to expand the scope. We recognize that some developments may have been overlooked, and that some sources may not be viewed by all as credible or balanced. Inclusion of a news story and its summary does not constitute any kind of endorsement or position taken by RSN, and the text and positions included in the above are solely those of the authors of the respective articles. If you have any comments or feedback for us regarding this digest, please email advocacy@rsn.ngo. For more information about RSN and our work, please visit <https://refugeesolidaritynetwork.org/>