

Developments related to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

March 30 - April 5, 2020



REFUGEE SOLIDARITY
NETWORK

Highlights:

Camp Conditions:

- In order to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus in the camps, the government of Bangladesh has taken several steps, including limiting of additional activities of various agencies inside the camps in Cox's Bazar.

High-level Statements:

- The US has said it is deeply troubled by escalating violence in the northern Rakhine state and Chin state of Myanmar, where dozens have been killed and thousands have been displaced in recent months.
- UNHCR has detailed a series of measures it is taking in its field operations to help respond to the COVID-19 public health emergency and prevent further spread.

International Response:

- The World Bank has approved \$350 million in grant financing for three projects to help Bangladesh cope with one of the world's largest 'forced exodus' of Rohingya from Myanmar.
- 50 human rights organizations wrote an open letter to Shiekh Hasina this week, urging the government to lift the ongoing mobile internet restrictions in the Rohingya camps, and halt the construction of fences around the camps, in Cox's Bazar.
- Three Rohingya rights groups issued a joint statement calling upon the international community and the Myanmar government to come forward to protect Rohingya communities from the ongoing coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic.
- The International Rescue Committee and Refugees International have separately published research this week on the potential impact of COVID-19 on refugees.

National Response:

- Bangladeshi local and national NGOs, civil society groups and journalists have called upon the government to launch a wide-range of awareness campaigns on coronavirus in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar.
- COAST Trust, a national NGO working for coastal people and Rohingya, has distributed Tk 31.50 lakh to government for creating coronavirus welfare fund and also for raising awareness in coastal area and Rohingya camps.
- BRAC has allocated a budget of Tk 150 million (15 crore) for low-income families in urban slums, semi-urban and hard to reach areas whose livelihood has been impacted due to the social distancing measures of COVID-19 pandemic.

Developments:

[Protect human rights during the pandemic](#) The Daily Star (April 5)

[op-ed] We don't know what the true impact of the covid-19 crisis will be. What we do know, however, is that the wealthiest countries are struggling to cope. For Bangladesh, which has neither the economic means nor the public health resources needed, there is even less room for failure. This makes it all the more important that its response

protects everyone, including those who are at the greatest risk. Everyone has the right to "the highest standards of physical and mental health," as guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Bangladesh is a state party. The state's obligations include efforts to prevent, treat and control the effects of the covid-19 pandemic in the country.

[Fishing boat takes 202 Rohingya migrants to Malaysia](#) Prothom Alo (April 5)

Malaysia has detained 202 suspected Rohingya Muslims who arrived illegally by boat, a top official said, raising fears that people smugglers are back in action despite the coronavirus pandemic. Zulinda Ramly, deputy director with the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency said a large fishing boat ferried the suspected Rohingya migrants to the northern resort island of Langkawi.

Similar:

[Malaysia intercepts boat ferrying 202 suspected Rohingya](#) Reuters (Apr. 5)

[Malaysia detains boatload of 202 Rohingya refugees](#) Star Tribune (Apr. 5)

[Malaysia detains boatload of 202 presumed Rohingya refugees](#) Washington Times (Apr. 5)

[None responds to government offer for Bhasan Char settlement](#) New Age Bangladesh (April 5)

None from the low-income group is yet to respond to the government offer to settle them in Bhasan Char island of Noakhali amid the ongoing coronavirus crisis. The government on March 23 instructed all the deputy administrations to send people from low income groups to Bhasan Char to make use of the island's facilities, which were initially prepared for relocating Rohingyas there. The government made the offer as a part of its 'return to home' programme to facilitate transfer of the low income people unable to maintain their livelihood in urban or rural areas. Thirteen days after the offer was made, none showed interest to settle them in the island with the government support.

[Rohingya camps to have limited service from aid agencies](#) Prothom Alo (April 4)

As part of the measures to prevent the spread of novel coronavirus, the government has taken several steps including limiting the activities of various agencies in the Rohingya camps at Cox's Bazar. These activities at the camps were limited in the last week of March and have been further limited after another meeting in Cox's Bazar. Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC) sources said that till further notice, other than medical aid, nutrition, safety, emergency food, water and sewerage, all programmes will remain halted at the Ukhiya and Teknaf camps.

[COVID-19 Could Ravage Refugees and Asylum Seekers](#) Just Security (April 3)

Pandemics, like other disasters, strike hardest on the most vulnerable, including the world's 30 million refugees and asylum seekers. They will likely experience elevated morbidity and mortality from COVID-19. Additionally, infections among refugees and asylum seekers could spread more widely, leading to repeat surges. The vulnerability of refugees and asylum seekers has been long recognized, yet the vast majority of countries have not even included refugees and asylum seekers in their pandemic preparedness plans. Not surprisingly, little to no specific policies have yet been initiated to prevent or treat COVID-19 among refugees and asylum seekers. Given their abundantly clear vulnerabilities to COVID-19, refugees and asylum seekers urgently need action to mitigate a disaster. The immediate priorities are clear: rapidly mobilize education about risks and preventive strategies; provide healthcare workers and other community workers with personal protective equipment and testing kits; transport persons with COVID-19 out of settings where they can expose others, but don't deport them; move asylum seekers out of closed immigration detention, and; provide the sick with supportive treatment.

Similar:

[The Unseen Pandemic](#) The Atlantic (Apr. 2)

[The Greatest Panic Over The Danger of COVID-19 On The World Refugee Camp](#) The Organization for World Peace (Mar. 30)

[One of the world's most vulnerable groups now finds itself confronting covid-19](#) Washington Post (Apr. 2) [opened]

[The world's most vulnerable countries could become the next coronavirus hotspots](#) ABC News (Apr. 1)



[COVID-19 threatens to decimate the world's 70m displaced people: report](#) Radio Canada International (Apr. 3)
[Refugee Camps Face COVID-19: 'If We Do Nothing, The Harm Is Going To Be So Extreme'](#) NPR (Mar. 31)
[Atrocity Alert Special Issue: COVID-19, conflict and the threat of atrocities](#) Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (Apr. 1)
['Slow-motion genocide': coronavirus fears grow among refugees in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Thailand](#) South China Morning Post (Apr. 5)

[Coronavirus: COAST Trust donates Tk 31.50 lakh to government fund](#) United News Bangladesh (April 3)
COAST Trust, a national NGO working for coastal people and Rohingya, has distributed Tk 31.50 lakh to the government for creating coronavirus welfare fund and also for raising awareness in coastal area and Rohingya camps. Among the fund, Tk 16.00 lakh was distributed to eight coastal districts like Bhola, Cox's Bazar, Chattogram, Feni, Laxmipur, Patuakhali, Barishal and Jhalakathi and 37 coastal upazillas to Deputy Commissioners and Upazilla Nirbahi Officers in the government created corona virus welfare fund.

[Rohingya Refugees Brace for a New Deadly Threat – Coronavirus](#) Time (April 3)
In the largest refugee settlement on earth we are holding our breath. On March 24, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh confirmed a COVID-19 case. It's now just a matter of time before the outbreak reaches the nearby camps, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees like myself are living. Having already endured a brutal military crackdown and displacement from our homes in Myanmar, we now face the prospect of further, protracted devastation. Social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine are fantasies for Rohingya refugees like me. My family of seven lives inside a 5-meter (16-foot) tarpaulin structure. Such flimsy shelters are the norm in the camps here, which have an average density of more than 100,000 people per square mile. What makes matters worse is that we rely on aid for survival. People here do not have access to income, and so cannot afford the most basic materials needed to prevent the spread of coronavirus, such as face masks and soap. In the camps, dozens of people share a hand-pump and toilet. Hygiene is a luxury. Rumors are spreading and panic is growing. One night last week, my camp was alive with noise and anxiety. Prayers were chanted at midnight as the Imams and people sought God's protection. The Rohingya spirit is strong; we have overcome so much. We will continue to fight for our rights in Myanmar and in Bangladesh. But for now, we are once again faced with a battle for survival itself. We implore the world to listen to our cries for help.

Similar:

[Coronavirus fears hit Rohingya refugee camps](#) Deutsche Welle (Apr. 4)
[Fear of COVID-19 Spreads Among Rohingyas in Bangladesh Refugee Camps](#) Yahoo! News (Apr. 3)
[Rohingyas in crowded camps vulnerable to virus outbreak](#) The News (Apr. 5)
[Bracing for the coronavirus in the world's largest refugee camp](#) International Rescue Committee (Apr. 3)
[Crowded in camps, Rohingya refugees vulnerable to coronavirus](#) Japan Times (Apr. 4)
[Rohingya refugees and coronavirus: A disaster waiting to happen?](#) Asean Today (Mar. 30)
[South Asian nations must take care of refugees](#) India Post (Apr. 1) [op-ed]
[Race against time to prevent coronavirus outbreak in Rohingya camps](#) United News Bangladesh (Mar. 30)

[Washing Hands With Ash, And Other COVID-19 Information From Bangladeshi Community Radio](#) Forbes (April 3)
A month ago, community radio stations in Bangladesh started broadcasting information related to a quickly spreading threat: COVID-19. These 16 stations are non-commercial, donor-supported, locally run, and mostly volunteer-operated. They're especially useful to communicate with people with low or no literacy, or to keep up with the quickly changing situation on the ground. There's a hunger for accurate information, and community radio stations are a part of this response. According to Mark Manash Saha, the program coordinator of the Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC), these FM stations have a collective audience of 6.8 million people. These include people who listen via their cellular phones, from farmers in their fields to homemakers in their homes. Saha says that the volunteers are working with local coronavirus prevention committees, and collecting information over the phone. Despite the frightening nature of the pandemic, Saha is ultimately optimistic about the role of the community radio stations and others in sharing locally relevant information and curbing the spread.



[Amnesty International for lifting internet restriction in Rohingya camps](#) New Age Bangladesh (April 2)

Amnesty International and 49 other human rights organisations have urged the government to lift the ongoing mobile internet restrictions in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar. They, in a letter to prime minister Sheikh Hasina, also urged the government to halt the construction of the barbed wire fencing around the camps.

Similar:

[Joint Letter Re: Restrictions on Communication, Fencing, and COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar District Rohingya Refugee Camps](#) Human Rights Watch (Apr. 1)

[Bangladesh Urged to Lift Telecom Ban on Rohingya Camps to Ease COVID-19 Risks](#) VOA News (Apr. 2)

[Lift internet shutdowns at Rohingya refugee camps: HRW](#) The Financial Express (Mar. 31)

[Rights Group Calls for Moratorium on Internet Shutdowns Amid Coronavirus Outbreak](#) Time (Mar. 31)

[This is not the time to restrict communication](#) Dhaka Tribune (April 2) [op-ed]

[BRAC commits Tk 15 cr as emergency cash assistance](#) Prothom Alo (April 2)

BRAC has allocated a budget of Tk 150 million (15 crore) for low-income families in urban slums, semi-urban and hard to reach areas whose livelihood has been impacted due to the social distancing measures of COVID-19 pandemic. Tk 1500 will be provided to each family as an emergency food assistance fund, starting from 2 April.

[WB provides Bangladesh \\$350m for Rohingya, host communities](#) New Age Bangladesh (April 1)

The World Bank has approved \$350 million in grant financing for three projects to help Bangladesh cope with one of the world's largest 'forced exodus' of Rohingya from Myanmar. These grants would help Bangladesh to address the needs of the host communities and the displaced Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar regarding health services, response to gender-based violence, social protection, basic services and infrastructure. Mercy Tembon, World Bank country director for Bangladesh and Bhutan said 'The three grants will cater to the needs of both the host and Rohingya communities. At the same time, they will strengthen the country's service delivery capacity and increase resilience to natural disaster and climate change.'

Similar:

[World Bank grants \\$350m for Rohingyas, host communities in Bangladesh](#) The Daily Star (Apr. 1)

[\\$350m World Bank grant for Rohingyas, host communities](#) New Age Bangladesh (Apr. 2)

[WB provides \\$350mn for locals, Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar](#) United News Bangladesh (Apr. 1)

[Bangladesh: Emergency Multi-Sector Rohingya Crisis Response Project \(Additional Financing\)](#) The World Bank (Mar. 31)

[US raises concern over violence in Rakhine, Chin states of Myanmar](#) Dhaka Tribune (April 1)

The US has said it is deeply troubled by escalating violence in the northern Rakhine state and Chin state of Myanmar, where dozens have been killed and thousands have been displaced in recent months. "We call on the Government of Burma to allow unhindered humanitarian access and to restore internet access. We also call on others to provide additional assistance and avoid actions that would further destabilise the region," said US Department of State Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus. The current situation is exacerbated by ongoing restrictions on humanitarian and media access, and the prolonged internet blackout, which cut communities off from lifesaving assistance and vital information, according to US Department of State.

[New IRC analysis reveals risk that coronavirus transmission rates in Moria, Al Hol and Cox's Bazar refugee camps could outpace those seen on the Diamond Princess cruise ship](#) International Rescue Committee (April 1)

Refugees and displaced people in camps in Syria, Greece and Bangladesh face a heightened risk of Coronavirus owing to conditions that are even more cramped and densely populated than the Diamond Princess - the cruise ship where transmission of the virus was four times faster than in Wuhan at the peak of the outbreak. New analysis by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) examines the extreme levels of population density in refugee camps around the



world, using research by ACAPS. The IRC found that when combining the close proximity between those living on board the ship with the limited access to water, sanitation and hygiene found in displacement camps, the disease will spread fast and could devastate communities.

Similar:

[Virus could spread faster in camps than on ships: NGO Outlook India \(Apr. 1\)](#)

[Leading Jewish Global Human Rights Group Warns of COVID-19's Danger to Rohingya People, Calls on U.S. to Act](#)

American Jewish World Service (April 1)

[press release] The threat of COVID-19 reveals the deep vulnerabilities of more than a million Rohingya people who — after escaping genocidal violence by their own government in Myanmar — now live in dire conditions in camps in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The United States government needs to use its diplomatic clout to urge immediate action by both Bangladesh and Myanmar to prevent COVID-19 from being even more devastating on this already marginalized community.

[Locals in Cox's Bazar making protective masks for frontline workers combating coronavirus](#)

Dhaka Tribune (March 31)

Covid-19 poses a major threat to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees and local community members in Cox's Bazar. The global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) will aggravate the situation further. To combat the crisis, IOM has initiated a project in Cox's Bazar to produce 6,000 washable cloth masks for frontline Cyclone Preparedness volunteers and Fire Service and Civil Defence personnel who have been working with UN Migration to raise awareness about the disease and communicate ways to avoid infection. The initiative, launched recently by IOM and its NGO partners, Protyashi and Nongor, have set up operations at Ukhiya and Teknaf, respectively. The mask production has been approved by the Directorate General of Health Services and Cox's Bazar Civil Surgeon.

Similar:

[Bangladeshi Communities Make Protective Masks for Frontline Workers Combating Coronavirus](#) IOM (Mar. 31)

[UNHCR 'doing all it can' to prevent spread of coronavirus](#)

United News Bangladesh (March 31)

UNHCR has detailed a series of measures it is taking in its field operations to help respond to the COVID-19 public health emergency and prevent further spread. "I am deeply concerned at this unprecedented pandemic and its impact on refugees and their host communities. The COVID-19 crisis has already had significant consequences for our operations, forcing us to rapidly adjust the way we work. However, we are sparing no effort to help and protect refugees the best we can under these difficult circumstances," said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He said their top priority in the COVID-19 crisis is to ensure that the people they serve are included in response plans and are properly informed, while they supplement the governments' preparedness and response efforts wherever needed. On March 26, UNHCR called for \$255 million as part of the wider UN appeal, to focus on priority countries that will require specific action, according to a media release issued from Geneva.

Similar:

[UNHCR frets refugees' health in the face of Covid-19 pandemic](#) Prensa Latina (Mar. 31)

[UN High Commissioner for Refugees says he's 'deeply concerned' about impact of COVID-19 pandemic](#) The Globe and Mail (Mar. 31)

[UN refugee agency 'rapidly adjusting' the way it works amid COVID-19 pandemic](#) UN News (Apr. 1)

[Encouraging signs in our handling of the crisis](#)

Dhaka Tribune (March 31)

In a major report on Bangladesh and its handling of the Covid-19 crisis entitled "Defusing Bangladesh's Covid-19 time-bomb," the South Asia Center of Washington DC-based think tank the Atlantic Council points out these signs of encouragement with respect to Bangladesh's handling of the crisis. According to the report, while Bangladesh's



government was hardly alone in not tackling the pandemic early enough, fortunately, after a slow start, the government has begun to show signs of urgency. Following the mass religious gathering in southern Bangladesh, the government started enforcing social distancing measures. Local administrations have been told to punish violators of the home-quarantine rules in line with Section 269 of the Penal Code. Additionally, an emergency lockdown has been imposed in the sub-district of Shibchar since March 19 where many returnees from Italy are based. Most recently, the government declared a ten-day nationwide holiday from March 26 to April 4, wherein all government and private offices have been closed, and with the army mobilized to enforce social distancing across the nation. The PM has indicated that this may be extended to April 9. Almost all international flights have been suspended until April 7 and the country's March 26 Independence Day celebrations were subdued. The government encouraged low-income people to return to their villages where they would be provided with government aid or to take refuge in Bhashan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal originally built to house Rohingya refugees. On March 20, the government authorized the Bangladesh Army to run two quarantine centers in Dhaka.

Similar:

[Defusing Bangladesh's COVID-19 time bomb](#) Atlantic Council (Mar. 30)

[Why Bangladesh's Restriction of Internet Access to the Rohingya May Help Spread the Coronavirus](#) The National Interest (March 31)

The internet and telecommunications blackout, put in place alongside a series of other draconian restrictions decried by UN Human Rights experts, has severely exacerbated the threat of COVID-19. Information sharing and proper guidance from health officials and international aid agencies is extremely difficult to disseminate, and as a result, misinformation is running rampant in the camps. The lack of accurate information about the virus has reportedly stirred rumors that anyone who contracts it will be put to death by Bangladesh authorities. And compounding the issue further, refugees in the camps continue to gather in large groups to spread information because there is no other way to effectively communicate — making enforced “social distancing” impossible.

Similar:

[The internet crackdown in Rohingya refugee camps is dangerous](#) Dhaka Tribune (Mar. 31) [op-ed]

[Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh at risk of COVID-19 infection](#) AlJazeera (Mar. 30)

['Launch coronavirus awareness campaign in Rohingya camps, lift curbs on mobile internet'](#) The Daily Star (March 30)

Local and national NGOs, civil society groups and journalists have called upon the government to launch a wide-range of awareness campaigns on coronavirus in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar. They also called for lifting the restrictions on using mobile phones and internet and resume 4G facilities at the camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf. Speakers at a virtual press conference organised by the Cox's Bazar CSO NGO Forum (CCNF) today said this, adding that the Rohingyas are more vulnerable to Covid-19 infection because about 1.1 million refugees are living in a congested environment in Ukhiya and Teknaf.

Similar:

[Civil society calls for attention to Cox's Bazar](#) Prothom Alo (Mar. 30)

[Coronavirus: Special attention sought for Cox's Bazar](#) United News Bangladesh (Mar. 30)

[Covid-19: Rights groups call for protection of Rohingya refugees](#) Dhaka Tribune (March 30)

Three Rohingya rights groups have called upon the international community and the Myanmar government to come forward to protect Rohingya communities from the ongoing coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic. In a joint statement, the Arakan Rohingya Union, United States Council of Muslim Organizations, and The European Rohingya Council called upon the international community to mobilize the government agencies, medical communities, and health care organizations to protect Rohingya refugee communities in South and Southeast Asia.



[Strategies to contain coronavirus should include displaced people and asylum seekers: Report](#) The Straits Times (March 30)

The world's 70 million displaced people and asylum seekers are among the most vulnerable in the global coronavirus pandemic, US-based humanitarian group, Refugees International, has said in a report released on March 30. It urged governments to include these people in their strategies to contain the outbreak rather than simply close borders, lest they become new nodes of infection.

Similar:

[COVID-19 And The Displaced: Addressing the Threat of the Novel Coronavirus in Humanitarian Emergencies](#) Refugees International (March 30)

[New Report Says Refugees, Displaced People Especially Vulnerable to COVID-19 Pandemic](#) The Wire (Apr. 3)

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/>