

Remarks on the crisis affecting Rohingya and other communities in Bangladesh and Rakhine State, Burma

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address one of the most pressing yet underreported humanitarian crises of our time. My research on conflict and atrocities focuses on understanding and amplifying the voices of displaced communities for humanitarian planning.

As members of populations affected by conflict and persecution in Burma, my colleagues here are better positioned than I to speak on many of the issues addressed today, but I hope to contribute to this conversation by sharing an up-to-date briefing about the humanitarian crisis affecting the Rohingya and other groups in Bangladesh and Rakhine State in Burma. I will also share takeaways from recent consultations by my Rohingya research team and I to understand refugee community reactions to the evolving situation.

As many of you will know, the Rohingya are a mainly Muslim group who, like other ethnic and religious minority groups, have been subjected to discrimination and violence at the hands of the Burmese military for decades. In 2017, the situation escalated dramatically when a military crackdown in Myanmar forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee their homes, seeking refuge in neighboring Bangladesh. In a matter of months, over 730,000 people crossed the border, joining the tens of thousands who had already been displaced in previous years. In 2022, the US government determined that the Rohingya crisis amounted to genocide.

Conditions in the camps

While the government of Bangladesh has shown incredible generosity in hosting these refugees, the situation remains dire. The refugees live in overcrowded shelters, often made of bamboo and tarpaulin, which offer little protection from the elements. In the monsoon season, heavy rains lead to landslides and flooding, destroying homes and making life even more dangerous. At other times, massive fires have broken out and spread rapidly, affecting thousands of refugee families and destroying what little they owned. Access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare is limited, contributing to the spread of illness and malnutrition.

The Rohingya refugees are also highly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. Women and children are particularly at risk, with reports of sexual violence and human trafficking. The lack of legal status for these refugees in Bangladesh means that they are often denied basic rights, including the ability to work, have bank accounts, access education, or even venture outside of the camps.

Impacts of the USAID cuts

In this difficult context, international aid has played a crucial role in sustaining the Rohingya refugees. UN agencies and international and local NGOs have reliably provided basic food, shelter, and healthcare, but needs are vast and resources are limited. The United States has been a key donor to the Rohingya crisis response. Since 2017, USAID has contributed over \$2 billion in aid to the response, working alongside other government donors to meet minimum needs.

Before the recent aid cuts, funding gaps already hindered the ability of aid agencies to meet the growing needs of the refugee population. Now, a massive void has been left and the refugees have been left without the critical support they depend on for survival. Other donors have had no time to seek ways to fill gaps. Numerous clinics have been closed, cutting off patients' access to medical treatment, including pregnant and nursing mothers. Tensions will rise as some clinics become even more overcrowded than before, while others remain shuttered.

Sanitation services have been affected, including the de-sludging required to maintain the communal latrines on which refugees rely. People have complained of terrible smells and rising tensions. In a setting as overcrowded as the Rohingya camps, the rapid spread of diseases is a constant threat. The cuts leave refugees - and in turn, the Bangladeshi host communities adjacent to the camps, more vulnerable to outbreaks of diseases. There are reports that even basic soap distribution has been affected.

A routine distribution of food rations was delayed earlier this month, causing immediate harm given that nearly all refugees rely on rations for the majority of their caloric and nutritional needs. It was not clear if this delay was due to the aid freeze. It is very difficult for NGOs to share accurate information across such a big area, as many people are illiterate and have no internet access. Even if distribution delays are not due to the aid freeze, the freeze still drives mistrust, frustration, and panic. People will be on edge, wondering if their next rations will arrive.

Furthermore, without international assistance, the prospects for education and future opportunities for the Rohingya youth would remain bleak. Like youth from Burma's other minority groups, young Rohingya are growing up in a state of limbo, with little hope of either returning home or integrating into Bangladeshi society. Their futures are uncertain, and without education or vocational training, they are at risk of becoming a lost generation. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of youth have been laid off from volunteer jobs with NGOs for which they received a small stipend on which their families relied. Now, these families have no income and worry that they will not have food or healthcare either.

Protection services for vulnerable youth have been shut down, as have gardening projects that made the mega-camp a greener and healthier place, and many services for people with disabilities. Because the order describes a 90-day aid freeze and does not commit to a permanent closure, it is causing the same mix of fear and confusion as the resettlement freeze. One Rohingya teacher told us that rumors and panic are flying, and many refugees believe that all aid will stop completely, while others worry that international donors have abandoned the Rohingya cause.

The withdrawal of aid is also a threat to regional stability. As the humanitarian situation worsens, there is a real risk of increasing tensions within the camps and between the displaced and host communities in Bangladesh as competition for resources intensifies. Bangladesh is already under pressure, and will face even greater challenges without the stabilizing effect of adequate aid. There is even speculation among refugees that the aid reduction is part of some sort of political conspiracy to force the Rohingya to return to Burma, where they could face grave persecution as the root causes of the crisis remain unresolved.

Impacts of the refugee resettlement freeze

The refugee resettlement freeze is also having immediate impacts and affecting community morale. Globally, only about 1 percent of refugees are ever resettled to a third country. Fourteen of the world's wealthiest countries, including the US, participate in UNHCR's resettlement programs to absorb this small fraction. Most refugees either return home eventually or assimilate into their host country. Despite the limited reach of formal resettlement, it plays an outsized role in the minds of many displaced people, who pin their hopes on the prospect of resettlement, even if their chances for it are small. Thus, the resettlement freeze not only impacts those who were already in the pipeline, but those who aspired to enter it.

Dreams of resettlement give many young people the will to endure the squalid camp conditions in which they have survived for so long. Without this prospect, community members predict that human trafficking and smuggling will increase, as people engage with criminal syndicates to bring them on dangerous boat journeys to countries such as Malaysia, where they hope to find better conditions. But thousands have died along the way.

In such contexts of scarcity, hopelessness intertwines with desperation, and community members worry how crime rates will be affected. According to the elder, “Because of the prospect of resettlement, many people maintained a peaceful life hoping to have a chance...But now that it has stopped, they have no hope for their future.”

Situation update - Rakhine State

The Rohingya are not the only ones suffering in Bangladesh and their home region of Rakhine State in Burma. Ethnic Rakhine, a mainly Buddhist group, and other communities have been trapped in the crosshairs of fighting between the Burmese military and the Arakan Army, a Rakhine movement, and are also enduring displacement and violence. In early 2025, clashes between the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) continued, with the AA now controlling most of the region. This territory includes all of northern Rakhine State (NRS), the homeland of most Rohingya refugees.

While the Rohingyas’ situation has gained some international attention, the plights of the Rakhine people and other groups who call the region home are less discussed, yet equally important. Thus, today I also want to call your attention to the humanitarian crisis not only in the camps but in Rakhine State, where the Arakan Army has defeated the junta forces and taken control of most territory. Its government counterpart, the United League of Arakan, is consolidating control and building governance capacity across the region.

Rakhine State remains in turmoil after heavy fighting over the last year. A humanitarian and economic crisis affects civilians across the region, but humanitarian access remains severely curtailed. Hundreds of people have been killed over the past year of fighting, and hundreds of thousands remain displaced. The Myanmar military’s decades-long “Four Cuts” doctrine is in effect, where civilians are targeted along with combatants in conflict areas and access to food, funding, and communications is severed.

In November 2024, UNDP reported that the region was seeing a “famine in the making,” though humanitarian access remains limited and a comprehensive needs assessment has not been conducted since the heavy fighting over the last year. Sources on the ground say that each

community faces unique needs, so an assessment with a large sample size would need to be consulted to gain an accurate picture and respond adequately..

Since late January, the AA has allowed several thousand Rohingya and Hindus who fled to Bangladesh amid the fighting over the past year to return across the border and go back to their original homes. The openness of the border fluctuates depending on the AA's ongoing evaluation of Rohingya armed group movements, and it is unclear how many refugees will be permitted to return. In Rakhine State, displaced people and returnees face critical but distinct humanitarian needs. Access to markets and liquidity varies; in most areas, basic goods are available for purchase but people are cash-strapped. Some have taken to literally bundling cash piles carried overland via rugged parts of the Myanmar interior by elephants and horses.

Most of the food consumed in Rakhine State is produced internally, as the region benefits from fertile and ample agricultural lands. However, many NRS farmers were unable to cultivate paddy and other crops in 2024 and are focused on clearing the brush that has grown on fallow lands. Thus, it is unclear if the supply of rice and other essentials will be adequate after the next harvest season.

Trade and transport

The ULA has not yet brokered formal trade agreements, and a humanitarian corridor has not yet been established to allow aid to enter from Bangladesh or the Myanmar interior. Informal trade on small boats along the Naf River enables goods to be transported discreetly along established routes used regularly for informal, small-scale trade. For this, the sender must seek permission from Bangladesh border guard authorities and also coordinate in advance with the AA. Failing to properly engage the necessary persons could (and has) led to attacks on small boats.

Careful planning is needed to ensure a “Do No Harm” and conflict sensitive approach to aid and reconciliation in Rakhine State. Due to the assumption that needs are grave, humanitarians might rush to provide services despite the lack of a comprehensive, long-term strategic plan produced by the Rakhine authorities that ensures a consistent, principled, and equitable humanitarian response that serves all religious and ethnic communities.

After the ousting of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina after a popular uprising last year, an interim government led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamed Yunus has been proactive in discussing a new approach to the Rohingya crisis. Reportedly, one topic of conversation is relationship-building with the AA/ULA, who are likely to remain in control of most of the

Burma-Bangladesh border area. Interim government officials are reportedly open to establishing a humanitarian corridor.

However, critical conflict-related security concerns persist, posing challenges to humanitarian aid delivery. These threats are preventing progress toward restoring aid even as political will grows. Most dangerously, the Myanmar Armed Forces have continued airstrikes in recent months. On January 11, at least ten people were killed in strikes on a residential and market area in Kyauktaw. The targeting of the market signals the junta's intentions to make rebuilding and governance as difficult for the ULA/AA as possible. The MAF has lost its ground control of the region, taking to the air in desperation. China and other parties are reportedly interested in brokering talks with the SAC to respect a humanitarian corridor, but details about progress are unclear.

In addition, much of the region is very heavily mined, with multiple casualties in recent weeks, and demining activities have not yet begun. This prevents a humanitarian footprint on the ground. There have been mining incidents resulting in injury of Rohingya returnees who returned to their homes in NRS last month. The interim government has reportedly expressed willingness to support demining activities, which would be led by the Rakhine authorities.

Third, Rohingya armed groups pose a menace to stabilization and security. Although they are poorly armed, they stage occasional ambushes to demonstrate their presence, and have vowed to fight the AA. They play a role in driving intercommunal hostilities and instill fear in various ways. For example, Rohingya youth who have engaged with Rakhine counterparts on humanitarian projects are afraid of retribution from the armed groups due to their willingness to cooperate with the so-called enemy, and feel the need to limit their charitable collaborations. Rohingya armed groups also exert influence in the camps. New threats to refugees are on the horizon now that the groups have surprisingly aligned with the junta's armed forces - the same military that committed genocide against the Rohingya.

There is talk of mass forced conscription, and rumors fly that households will soon be pressured to send one household member each to fight the AA. It was unclear whether the conscripts would join the Rohingya armed groups to fight as proxies for the Myanmar military or were being recruited for the junta's forces directly. Obviously, these risks prevent progress on confidence-building between ethnic communities, an essential precursor to peace.

Looking to the Future

Despite the dire circumstances, there are a few rays of hope, such as the willingness of youth to collaborate across religious and ethnic divisions, and the fact that some displaced people were

allowed to return home. The international community must continue to provide support for the Rohingya refugees, not only in the form of emergency aid but also through long-term solutions. This includes advocating for the safe and voluntary return of the refugees to Myanmar when conditions allow, ensuring that they can live with dignity and without fear of persecution. At the same time, Bangladesh must be supported in managing this crisis, as the strain on its resources is immense.

In conclusion, the situation faced by the Rohingya and the other communities is a reminder of the need for sustained humanitarian aid to address the needs of the most vulnerable. The United States and others must continue to support them, not just with food and shelter, but with the hope and opportunity they deserve for a better future.