



10 years for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh : Past, present and future

MSF Holland

Summary of the report in the 2001-2002 MSF International Activity Report

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Fearing repatriation to Myanmar, a country that denies them citizenship, and without offers for third-country resettlement, 21,600 Rohingya refugees endure malnutrition, confinement, abuse and neglect in Bangladesh, their country of refuge. In March 2002, MSF published a report calling for solutions that protect the Rohingyas and respect their dignity and rights. Following is a summary of the report, “Ten Years for the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Future,” which can be found, together with personal testimonies from some of the refugees, at www.msf.org

“I was born in Burma, but the Burmese government says I don’t belong there. I grew up in Bangladesh, but the Bangladesh government says I cannot stay here. As a Rohingya, I feel I am caught between a crocodile and a snake.”

19-year-old male refugee, Nayapara camp

| Discrimination, violence, religious intolerance and forced labor practices by the authorities in Myanmar (Burma) triggered an exodus of more than 250,000 Rohingya people from Rakhine (Arakan) state in Myanmar to Bangladesh between mid-1991 and early 1992. Since 1992, approximately 232,000 of the refugees have been returned to Myanmar under a repatriation program supervised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Today, more than 21,600 of them remain in two camps south of Cox’s Bazaar.

| In 1992, the Bangladeshi government welcomed the refugees and settled them in 20 camps with the notion that their stay was short-term. Now, ten years later, the Rohingyas continue to live in temporary, emergency-like conditions that are substandard and unhealthy. Prohibited from leaving the camp freely, the refugees remain confined to overcrowded, tight spaces, with insufficient water, inadequate shelter and few educational opportunities. They are not allowed to work or farm, nor are they provided sufficient food to feed their families. As a result, 58% of the refugee children and 53% of the adults were suffering from chronic malnutrition at the end of 2001.

| Throughout their decade of exile, the Rohingyas have confronted waves of aggression and coercion in their land of refuge. Many have been sent back to Myanmar against their will, in violation of the

principle of voluntary repatriation. While incidents of forced repatriation have declined in recent years, violence and intimidation by camp officials persist.

| Although refugees have three possible solutions to their situation – repatriation, integration in the host country and resettlement in a third country – the Rohingya refugees do not seem to be given a choice. The UNHCR promotes repatriation as the most optimal solution, contending that the security situation in Rakhine state is stable and conducive to their safe return. But human rights reports, witness accounts and testimonies from newly arriving Rohingyas state that the situation has not improved. As a result, many refugees are unwilling to repatriate.

The Bangladeshi government does not support local integration of the remaining refugees, and the international community has not yet expressed an interest in resettling them in “third” countries.

| Unwanted in their land of birth, and no longer welcomed in their land of refuge, the Rohingya refugees face an uncertain future. Until a political breakthrough is achieved, intermediate and long-term solutions must be sought for those refugees unwilling to return to Myanmar. The living conditions of the refugees and the safety and security in the camps need to be improved. The refugees need to be viewed not as a burden or “residual caseload,” but as human beings, with hopes, voices and rights.



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Rohingya refugee family at Nayapara camp. Jalil, the young boy sitting in his mother’s lap, suffers from malaria.