

# Let Rohingya Learn

Confronting the Need for Rohingya Education





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## **Confronting the Need for Rohingya Education**

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**BURMA  
TASK FORCE**

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The Rohingya are indigenous people of Burma living in their ancestral lands. Most of them now reside in the largest refugee camp in Bangladesh surrounded by barbed wire all around them.

While the whole world is thankful to Bangladesh for giving refuge to Rohingya facing genocide, we will be more thankful if Bangladesh allows them to learn.

Burma that took away their citizenship in 1982 making it difficult for Rohingya to enter school. Rohingya being resilient with sabr, developed an alternate: they enhanced their mosque school system of madrasah.

In 2012, however, Burma banned all mosques and all madrasah.

Before the “final solution of the Rohingya problem” was advanced in 2017, Rohingya were already rendered into an illiterate minority in Rakhine state which has a literacy rate of 84.7%. Of course, Rohingyas were not counted in these official statistics.

I led an interfaith delegation in a meeting with the foreign secretary of Bangladesh in 2018. Even at that time he was skeptical of Rohingyas ever going back to Burma. That looks more a realistic scenario now as the genocidal military has taken over the Burmese government. Rohingyas want to go back to their ancestral land. We will continue to fight for their right to return. But whether they go back to Burma or stay in Bangladesh, an educated Rohingya will be a better citizen and a better neighbor. Who can deny that?

### **Let Rohingya Learn.**

I am immensely thankful to Adem Carroll for his excellent report. I hope it will advance opportunities for Rohingyas.

Abdul Malik Mujahid  
Chair  
Burma Task Force

Burma Task Force is a coalition of 38 Muslim organizations in the USA and Canada. It is a part of Justice For All.

As a persecuted minority in Burma (Myanmar), Rohingya Muslims have long faced drastic limits on access to school in their homeland of Rakhine State. Increasingly disenfranchised over several decades, the majority of the population was violently displaced by the brutal Burmese military during genocidal “clearance” operations in August and September 2017. Since then, over half a million<sup>1</sup> Rohingya children have been crowded into vast refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Unfortunately, local authorities have largely ignored Rohingya rights to education. Like animals in a zoo, young refugees are kept alive with regular feeding, but their human potential has been ignored.

This is one of the rare open spaces in the crowded Rohingya camps where children can play. And play is all they can do. Since there is hardly any school for this age group. Bangladesh has now surrounded the camps with barbed wire fences and requires permits to go in or out of the camps.

This system has even ended education for those Rohingya children already enrolled by their parents into non-Rohingya schools. Most of these students were expelled from school at the order of the Bangladeshi government even before the fences were erected.



In the camps, some informal learning centers have been allowed to operate, run by Rohingya themselves, but these face a variety of bureaucratic obstacles such as lack of funding or accreditation, further restricting Rohingya hopes for a better future. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the poverty and isolation of these displaced people. But even before pandemic restrictions were imposed in March 2020, international humanitarian organizations have had difficulty obtaining access and permits. The Bangladesh government compounds the social, psychological and economic harm that traumatized refugees have suffered. By forgetting education’s benefits to all, the authorities risk the social order, with unemployed young people falling into hopelessness and frustration

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR has estimated 55% of 860,000 Rohingya refugees are children; however according to the Bangladesh Government the total Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is 1.1 million which suggests 605,000 children. We also note that by mid 2020 Bangladesh authorities counted an additional 76,000 Rohingya babies born in the camps.

**in addition to keeping the Rohingya people in poverty, the current lack of educational opportunities may lead to alienation, criminal activities, child marriage and trafficking.**

with the futility of limited lives. Local NGOs assert that, in addition to keeping the Rohingya people in poverty, the current lack of educational opportunities may lead to alienation, criminal activities, child marriage and trafficking.

Though the Government of Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), it has ignored its legal obligations to provide education, maintaining a public position that the Rohingya will soon be repatriated. Since the Burmese military coup of February 1, 2021, this particular fiction has become extremely difficult to maintain. The genocidal Burmese military leadership continues to oppose Rohingya repatriation.<sup>2</sup>

In “Are We Not Human?”<sup>3</sup> an excellent 2019 report based on 163 interviews with refugee children and other stakeholders, Human Rights Watch researchers describe the many restrictions that have been imposed on

Rohingya education in Bangladesh. The report notes that these restrictive policies long pre-date 2017, as the government of Bangladesh has limited educational opportunities previously available to Rohingya children from earlier mass expulsions. On the basis of their ethnicity, many Rohingya children who have grown up in Bangladesh have been barred from attending school outside the camps. Since 2017 the number of restrictions have only increased. In January 2020, Human Rights Watch noted plans for a pilot project to provide formal education to 10,000 children, calling this a positive

There are at least 600,000 Rohingya children in these Rohingya camps in Bangladesh. The total number of Rohingya refugees estimated by the Bangladeshi government is 1.1 million people.



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-junta-leader-casts-doubt-return-rohingya-2021-05-24/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/12/03/are-we-not-human/denial-education-rohingya-refugee-children-bangladesh#>



“step forward.”<sup>4</sup> However, with the arrival of the pandemic shortly after, access to the camps has been severely limited, and the human needs of 2019 are still unmet today.

Rohingya families express deep frustration and a sense of hopelessness about the lack of future prospects for their children. This is why the NGO Burma Task Force is responding to requests from the impacted communities to consider the current situation in this updated report, based on a review of available literature and on conversations with stakeholders. Official reports from UN agencies rarely describe difficulties of implementation in much detail.

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However, independent studies and surveys sometimes bring the Rohingya voice into policy discussions, along with a more open assessment of the challenges to service delivery. As we will see, some of these studies warn of distrust between many Rohingya refugees and the NGO community. Rohingya distrust can be understood in context of their long history of exclusion and insecurity, but also as a response to the sometimes paternalistic approach to humanitarian service provision.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/29/step-forward-10000-rohingya-refugee-children>

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## WHO ARE THE ROHINGYA?

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The Rohingya are a mainly Muslim ethnic group indigenous to Rakhine State in Northwest Burma. While historical records exist mentioning them by name in the late eighteenth century, Buddhist supremacists have promoted a false narrative that Rohingya are modern migrants from neighboring Bangladesh, or somehow identical to the South Asians brought in to work in British Colonial Burma. Historian Michael Charney has persuasively shown that for over 500 years Rakhine State has had a highly diverse demographic and an unstable, shifting political history. Muslim rulers alternated with periods of Bamar ethnic occupation, along with extensive periods of relatively peaceful pluralism with a local government incorporating both Muslim and Buddhist elements.<sup>5</sup> Local mosques stood among Buddhist temples.

For generations, social identity in Rakhine State was fluid, and intermarriage common. According to Charney, “local indigenous families probably moved many times back and forth between different ethnic categories, from Rohingya to Rakhine and even to Bamar and back again.” However in the early 19th century British colonial authorities decided that “Rakhine State should be categorised as having one native language, one native race, and one native religion, despite its huge diversity.” Their choice of the Bamar Buddhist narrative of history created new divisions and hardened boundaries. Charney shows how politicized interpretation of ancient “founding” narratives has led to minority exclusion and ultimately genocide. Unfortunately this mythologizing trend is currently becoming even more widespread throughout the region, beyond Burma to India.

Though the Rohingya population was formally acknowledged as part of post colonial Burma, this inclusivity came to an end starting 60 years ago as the long years of military dictatorship began, as military leaders established an alliance with extremist Buddhist monks to promote a form of exclusionary nationalism that demonized Muslims and Rohingya in particular.

The ongoing discourse regarding which “national races” are to be considered legitimate both reflects and perpetuates tensions between various ethnic groups throughout Burma<sup>6</sup>. This is a power game that the “Tatamadaw,” Burmese military leaders have played to divide and control the nation since 1962. During the many decades since then, the civil war existing between ethnic armies and the Tatmadaw has remained unresolved. Recently, the November 2020 elections excluded not only the Rohingya but other ethnic populations “on security grounds.”

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5 <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30448/1/Rohingya-and-Rakhine-Burma-Myanmar-Michael-Charney.pdf>

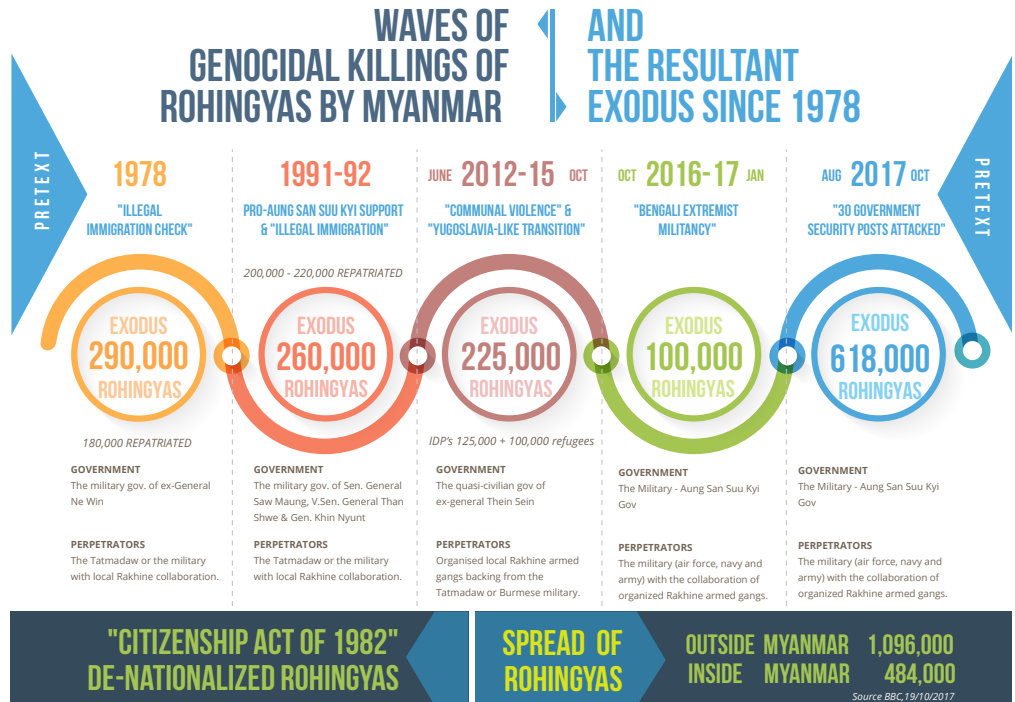
6 <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Rebuttal-to-Tonkin-long.pdf>

But in early 2021, the leaders of the military party chose to reject power sharing with the civilian authorities, in favor of a dream of absolute control. Tatmadaw leaders were not

satisfied with the winners of the 2020 election, the NLD party, despite its leader Aung San Suu Kyi's recent support for the military against genocide charges at the International Court of Justice. Consequently, soon after the February 2021 military coup, the entire nation began to feel the impact of persecution, the fear of torture and disappearance, and the same fear for the future that Rohingya have long endured.

## RAKHINE STATE REPRESSIONS

In "Apartheid Before Genocide,"<sup>7</sup> rights advocate Malik Mujahid details how Rohingya rights have been systematically weakened, limited and removed by Burmese authorities. Frequently the loss of one right results in the loss of another: for example, arbitrary restrictions on legal documentation will impact access to medical and educational services. Similarly, restrictions on the free movement of Rohingya will impact access to education, since many students would have to travel to another village to reach their local school. Mujahid also refers to the Amnesty International Report "Caged Without a Roof" (2017: 66) which states, "Amnesty International's research found in central Rakhine State, Muslim children and youths are largely unable to access official government-run schools, in particular middle and high schools. Rohingya students have also faced difficulties accessing higher education at the University in Sittwe for many years, owing



7 <https://www.burmataskforce.org/apartheidbeforegenocide/>



in large part to restrictions on their freedom of movement which require them to apply for official permission to travel to Sittwe to attend classes.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, some teachers refused to travel to Rohingya regions, and other volunteer teachers in Rohingya schools complained that the government hadn’t paid them in many months.<sup>9</sup>

Excluded from the 2015 National Census, the Rohingya population of rural Rakhine State has lacked sufficiently detailed documentation, and even gender differences in literacy have not been measured.<sup>10</sup> But because of rights restrictions and other exclusions resulting from Burma’s 1982 Citizenship Laws, we can assert that overall approximately 80 percent of Rohingya in Rakhine State were illiterate in 2017, while their Rakhine Buddhist neighbors were able to obtain an 84.7% literacy rate, according to the Burmese government 2015 statistics.<sup>11</sup>

● **because of rights restrictions and other exclusions resulting from Burma’s 1982 Citizenship Laws, we can assert that overall approximately 80 percent of Rohingya in Rakhine State were illiterate in 2017** ●

Burma Task Force researchers have collected survivor testimonies from refugees displaced from the village of Tula Toli, site of later atrocities and crimes against humanity that killed an estimated 500 men, women and children on August 30, 2017. Tula Toli was a microcosm of what was happening across Rakhine State for years: the Buddhist Rakhine held many rights and privileges that were not granted to Rohingya Muslims.

Education was literally moved out of reach for most Rohingya children of Tula Toli. The only village school was located in the newly settled Rakhine Buddhist neighborhood and was staffed exclusively with Rakhine teachers.

According to the testimonies we have heard, Rohingya children were initially allowed at the school, but were always dismissed after an hour or so.

According to Imam Abdul Ghafur, the only imam who survived the Tula Toli massacre in which four other imams were killed, Muslims developed an alternate “faith-based” system of education for boys and girls. There were originally five imams and four mosques. Most Rohingya children attended a madrasah school located in a mosque. The head Imam of Tula Toli was a graduate of Darul Uloom Deoband, a prestigious Islamic seminary in India. He had been the teacher of Imam Abdul Ghafur at the Darul Uloom Ahmadiya where he studied to qualify as an Imam. The madrasa was the same madrasa his grandfather studied at.

8 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA1674842017ENGLISH.PDF>

9 <https://rohingyakhobor.com/volunteer-teachers-from-rakhine-state-have-not-been-paid-salaries-since-june/>

10 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-census-reveals-huge-urban-rural-divide> and <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620528/rr-rohingya-refugee-response-gender-analysis-010818-en.pdf?>

11 [https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/3K\\_Rakhine\\_Figures\\_ENG.pdf](https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/3K_Rakhine_Figures_ENG.pdf)

In addition to religious education, that system continued to provide basic literacy for 30 years. It was not without its difficulties. The 92 year old former mayor Bodiur Rahman told our interviewers that Rohingya would often have to bribe others to get repairs to the mosque and madrasah. But in 2012 mosques were shut down. Imams were prohibited from teaching even at home. Imam Abdul Ghafur told our researchers that the order closing the mosque was personally handed to him by the Buddhist chairman of the Tula Toli council.

When it was shut down in 2012, there were 400 students and 30 teachers. This indicates that the alternate system that the Rohingya people developed when general education was denied to them, was truly extensive and sustained until the increased repression beginning in 2012. It is important not to overlook this history or under-estimate this capacity for self-help.



Providing religious instruction, madrasas went largely underground (as per Mujahid, p. 15). To obtain an education after 2012, some desperate and determined students were able to pay a bribe to travel to Sittwe or to IDP camp schools but risked arrest. However, Rohingya have continued to be denied access to study at Sittwe University in Rakhine State, or to travel to any other university throughout Burma (Amnesty 2017: p. 70-72).

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## **LEFT BEHIND**

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It is difficult to find updated information on the almost half a million Rohingya residents left behind after over 740,000 Rohingya men, women and children fled mass atrocities in September 2017. Most students must indeed feel “left behind,” given the Tatmadaw’s destruction of hundreds of Rohingya villages, increased conflict with the Arakan Army representing the Rakhine Buddhists, the 2020 pandemic and the 2021 coup. Educational opportunities must be few and far between.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, according to Human Rights Watch in October 2020, “About 65,000 Rohingya children are detained in (IDP) camps, where they are mainly provided, at best, with only basic instruction in “temporary learning centers.” Access to secondary education is limited to a single government school with 600 students, only two teachers, and four volunteer instructors. Rohingya students were

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/faced-with-discrimination-rohingya-struggle-for-an-education/80383>

expelled and barred from the last accessible university, in Sittwe, in 2012.”<sup>13</sup>

In the same statement, Human Rights Watch Associate Director Bill Van Esvald added: “In Myanmar’s Rakhine state, children and their parents are effectively locked down in villages and detention camps to which humanitarian access is severely restricted, and for most children, access to education is an unfulfilled dream.”

Five countries simply prohibit Rohingya from accessing public schooling: Bangladesh, Burundi, China, Malaysia and Nepal, but other nations place other obstacles in the path to education.

## REFUGEE REPRESSIONS

This paper will primarily examine barriers to Rohingya education in Bangladesh, where the world’s largest population of Rohingya refugees has been confined to camps. However it is useful to consider conditions in India, Malaysia and other host nations as points of comparison. The displaced Rohingya population faces similar legal restrictions in each location because their status as genocide survivors is ignored, allowing policymakers to treat them as unwanted economic migrants. Therefore, in most nearby Asian countries they manage to escape to, Rohingya refugees and forced migrants lack legal protections and struggle to obtain education for their children. Five countries simply prohibit Rohingya from accessing public schooling: Bangladesh, Burundi, China, Malaysia and Nepal, but other nations place other obstacles in the path to education.<sup>14</sup>

## MALAYSIA

Malaysia hosts the second largest number of Rohingya refugees, after Bangladesh, with 100,000 out of a total of 150,000 refugees from Burma over all. Experts estimate there are at least 50,000 Rohingya refugee children. Those born in Malaysia “inherit” their statelessness from their parents, as Malaysia does not grant birthright citizenship. However, unlike in Bangladesh, refugees in Malaysia have been allowed freedom of movement and not been confined to camps.

In early 2020 Educaid researchers from Peace Institute Oslo estimated that in the absence of access to public education in Malaysia, Rohingya children receive education from UNHCR and at least 148 other non-governmental organization sponsored learning centers, community-based organizations, and madrassas. However, the researchers added, “Only 30% of refugee children are enrolled in UNHCR-funded LCs, while the remaining 70% attend education programs provided by CBOs.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/22/rohingya-donors-should-require-including-education>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=12325>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=2088&type=publicationfile>



This system has serious limitations. In an early 2020 case study of a young Rohingya refugee man in Malaysia, researchers from several Malaysian universities note that these learning centers end at grade six and do not provide certification that would allow students to continue their education. Consequently, “many refugee children, particularly boys, end up as child labourers, as they look for jobs to help their families out of poverty. It is even harder on female children, as they often take on heavy housework, caring for their younger siblings and end up getting married early.”<sup>16</sup> It is well known that out of desperation, some young refugees will even find local families to legally adopt them in order for them to receive a proper education.

However the already challenging situation greatly worsened only two months later in 2020, with the rise of government rhetoric that increasingly portrayed refugees and migrants as a source of virus transmission. A series of police raids, arrests, detention, and deportations have created widespread fear.<sup>17</sup>

During the pandemic, refugees and migrants are increasingly vulnerable but have faced nationwide immigration crackdowns targeting undocumented people leading to more than 8,000<sup>18</sup> being arrested and held in Malaysian detention centers. Senior Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said the police had conducted 68 roadblocks nationwide and checked 32,106 vehicles to prevent the entry of undocumented migrants. A total of almost 20,000 migrants from Indonesia, Bangladesh and Burma were deported by July 2020.<sup>19</sup> As many as 1,400 Rohingya were stranded at sea in the first half of 2020, sometimes for weeks or months, vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by smugglers. By July 2020, it was estimated that at least 130 lives had been lost.<sup>20</sup>

A small survey conducted by the Mixed Migration Monitoring Initiative (MMI) in June 2020 found both Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees reported reduced access to work (83%), reduced availability of basic goods (69%) and increased worry and stress (55%).

Additionally, 32% of refugee respondents said that COVID-19 had reduced access to asylum processes, an increase from approximately a quarter of respondents in the previous survey. Among Rohingya respondents, nearly half reported experiencing increased racism and xenophobia due to COVID-19 and the high percentage remained the same in the next survey in July 2020.

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16 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2277977920905819>

17 <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/a-perfect-storm-malysias-forced-deportation-of-refugees-and-migrants-from-myanmar-amid-the-military-coup/>

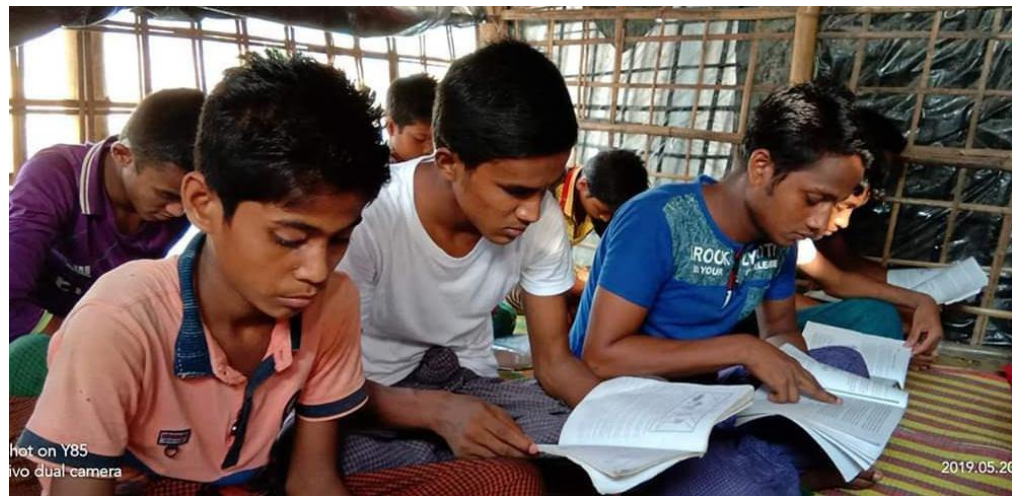
18 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/20/malaysia-end-abusive-immigration-detention>

19 <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/07/607750/19000-covid-free-undocumented-migrants-sent-back-says-ismail-sabri>

20 [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/blog/rescued-rohingya-grateful-local-support-after-120-days-stranded-sea\\_fr](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/blog/rescued-rohingya-grateful-local-support-after-120-days-stranded-sea_fr)

In this xenophobic climate, many refugees fear sending children to school even those that are not locked down due to the pandemic. Refugees have gone missing. According to journalist Emily Fishbein, “La Seng, leader of the Kachin Refugee Committee, said the group is searching for two undocumented asylum seekers who left their apartment to stay with a friend after running out of food in early April but never came back. He fears they may be deported to Myanmar.”<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after the military coup on February 1, 2021, despite mounting concerns over the increasing use of violence against civilians in Myanmar, on 24 February, “Malaysia deported 1,086 Myanmar nationals into the depths of chaos,” according to MMI. The move certainly violated the international principle of non-refoulement.”<sup>22</sup> The Malaysian government claimed no Rohingya were among those deported.



With frightening social media campaigns orchestrated against Rohingya refugees,<sup>23</sup> along with Malaysian government threats to use physical violence,<sup>24</sup> the Malaysian Home Minister Hamzah Zainudin declared that “Any organisation which claims to be representing the Rohingya is illegal...and legal action can be taken.

Rohingya nationals who are holders of the UNHCR card have no status, rights or basis to make any claims.”<sup>25</sup>

21 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/25/Malaysia-coronavirus-refugees-asylum-seekers-xenophobia>

22 <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/a-perfect-storm-malysias-forced-deportation-of-refugees-and-migrants-from-myanmar-amid-the-military-coup/>

23 <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3081958/malaysia-battles-coronavirus-its-rohingya-refugees-face-torrent>

24 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/malaysia-stop-plans-to-charge-rohingya-refugees-and-release-those-already-imprisoned/>

25 <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/01/hamzah-refugees-have-no-rights-to-state-demands-from-malaysian-government>

As Rohingya and other low income migrant populations slip to the margins of Malaysian society, the international community will need to intervene. It is a hopeful sign that the State of Qatar has pledged resources to provide tablets to “1,500 refugee children and youth of all ethnicities, as well as 200 teachers in 69 refugee learning centres in Malaysia.”<sup>26</sup>

However, the Malaysian government must end its anti-refugee campaign. It should listen to the detailed recommendations of its own social workers, as detailed in their November 2020 report “Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Children & Families in Malaysia,” written for UNICEF. There must be a complete rethinking of the social support system, currently more punitive than protective, even for children.<sup>27</sup>



As we will see in India, it is difficult to separate the harmful impact of repressive rhetoric from the effect of pandemic lockdowns that close schools for everyone, but especially exclude the poor and rural children with little access to the internet.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/en-my/news/latest/2020/12/5fc700304/qatar-commits-usd300000-for-refugee-education-to-overcome-covid-19-challenges.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/1916/file/Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Vulnerable%20Children%20&%20Families%20in%20Malaysia.pdf>



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## INDIA

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India is not a signatory of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. Instead, it deals with refugees and asylum seekers and refugees on an ad hoc basis. Regarding education, India signed the Convention on Rights of the Child, which mandates access to education. Like Bangladesh, it is not in compliance with this legal and moral requirement, as many Rohingya children lack access to school.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, about 40,000 Rohingya refugees, who face persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, have crossed the borders into India since the military-led mass atrocities in 2017.<sup>29</sup>

Many Rohingya refugees live in camps and slums in different cities and regions across India including Jammu, Hyderabad, Nuh and the capital New Delhi. Only about 17,000 of them are registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Instead of offering welcome to traumatized genocide survivors, local politicians have worked to marginalize them through promotion of anti-Rohingya sentiment. In April 2017, Rakesh Gupta, the president of Jammu Chambers of Commerce and Industries threatened refugees with destruction and called this demand a part of the Chamber's "corporate social responsibility."<sup>30</sup>

In 2019 the Indian Parliament passed the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which provides a pathway to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis or Christians—but not Muslims. Rohingya Muslims, are therefore not eligible to seek Indian citizenship under the CAA.

However, even before the passage of CAA the Indian government refused to formally recognize Rohingyas as refugees. Despite an increasingly hostile environment, and limited civil rights, Rohingyas are at least not confined to camps to the extent that Rohingyas in Bangladesh are. As urban refugees, they have the autonomy to accept assistance from whomever they wish. Small local NGOs visit Rohingya communities to provide weekly meals, provide health programming, and to teach Hindi or English. These are joined by Fair Trade Forum India, Development and Justice Initiative, Gandhi National Memorial Society, along with ActionAid, Bal Raksha Bharat (Save the Children), and other INGOs. Another of the most active charities, Bosco Organization for Social Concern and Operation (BOSCO), usually maintains a low profile because they are a Catholic organization, and 90 percent of their beneficiaries are Muslim.

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28 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/rohingya-muslims-refugee-myanmar-india-bangladesh-4843379/>

29 <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/hundreds-of-rohingya-families-leave-india-after-deportations>

30 <https://thewire.in/rights/rohingya-refugee-women-jammu>

Gandhi National Memorial Society (GNMS), along with ActionAid, Bal Raksha Bharat (Save the Children), and other INGOs. Another of the most active charities, Bosco Organization for Social Concern and Operation (BOSCO), usually maintains a low profile because they are a Catholic organization, and 90 percent of their beneficiaries are Muslim.

Generally, India has limited the reach of UNHCR both geographically and administratively. Because UNHCR's mandate is so limited and Indian politicians have politicized the Rohingya refugee situation, it helps UNHCR to have prominent local NGOs take responsibility for the Rohingya refugees. In "An Assessment of UNHCR Crisis Response of a Rohingya Refugee Camp in India" (2019) researcher Ashvina Patel observed that, "When an NGO, such as Zakat Foundation India, voluntarily steps in to help advocate on behalf of Rohingya refugees, the burden is lifted from UNHCR. In fact, at the final coordination meeting, a UNHCR staff member said, with relief, "Zakat Foundation has adopted the Rohingya from this camp." According to the researcher, this somewhat paternalist statement resulted in Rohingya refugee resentment.



Ms Patel also observed, "In Jammu, an act of arson at a Rohingya settlement in April 2017 received very little community and UNHCR support. In fact, the author visited the site in October 2017, and many Rohingya were still waiting for UNHCR replacement identity cards. Even though the UNHCR is restricted in Jammu by the Indian government, their partner organization in the region failed to provide this basic protection for months after the arson. Where urban refugees self-settle has a great impact in terms of safety and aid response."<sup>31</sup>

31 <https://hazards.colorado.edu/quick-response-report/an-assessment-of-unhcr-crisis-response-of-a-rohingya-refugee-camp-in-india>

In a January 2021 email, Ms. Patel, now a Research Affiliate at Southern Methodist University, added: “Because India is hosting a mobile population, there is no single organization that provides education to Rohingya children. It varies region to region. Access to public education also varies as well based on public administration sensitivity to refugee issues-- therein lies the biggest challenge.” Therefore, considering the local politics, it seems clear that the Rohingya living in Jammu face the most risk. Over 6,523 Rohingya refugees live in 39 camps that are located across Jammu. On March 6, 2021, Indian police detained 155 Rohingya living in Jammu City.

After protests opposing these detentions were held in front of the UNHCR in Delhi, an additional 90 Rohingya were arrested.<sup>32</sup> A local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader of Jammu and Kashmir Hunar Gupta invoked security fears regarding Pakistan: ““I raised the concern of illegal Rohingyas living in the sensitive Jammu area which is close to the Pakistan border.... These people should be deported or at least thrown out of Jammu and Kashmir. They were brought to Jammu and Kashmir to change the demography of the region.”<sup>33</sup>

Fearing imminent deportation, local activists asserted that those arrested in Delhi all held UNHCR cards, but Jammu police spokesman Mukesh Singh claimed that the cards do not entitle Rohingyas to refugee status in India. Quoted in the Wire, Delhi-based Sabber Kyaw Min from the Rohingya Human Rights Initiative said, “The UNHCR is acting helpless at a time when the Rohingya need their intervention.” After advocates filed a lawsuit, Indian courts provided assurances that deportations would not be rushed, but detainees remained in new holding centers,” constructed by the J&K government.<sup>34</sup>

As the first wave of the pandemic hit India, social media became a vehicle to blame Muslims and refugees in India. But unlike Malaysia, Indian leaders framed Islam as the infection to be entirely removed. Claims were made the Muslims were spreading the sickness intentionally through a “Coronajihad.” It took some time for social media companies to take down messages of incitement, and to date their efforts have been insufficient.<sup>35</sup>

The surrounding hostility has prevented many Rohingya from getting their education<sup>36</sup>. In 2021, local advocates reported that the 3700 children living in Jammu are denied school admission “due to

32 <https://thewire.in/rights/rohingyas-detained-delhi-unhcr-protest>

33 <https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/rohingya-refugees-detained-jammu-fear-deportation>

34 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/rohingyas-jammu-deported-supreme-court-7264499/> and <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/rohingya-refugees-jk-kathua-hiranagar-7217549/>

35 <https://time.com/5815264/coronavirus-india-islamophobia-coronajihad/>

36 Young people have been directly targeted for example <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-moves-to-deport-rohingya-girl-to-myanmar-draws-criticism-7255463/>



lack of “Adhaar” documentation cards.<sup>37</sup> Despite this, local charities and civil society groups like the Sakhawat Centre help support educational initiatives that are largely Rohingya-run.<sup>38</sup>

Anwar, (not his real name) was a 14 year old when the Burmese military killed his parents, all siblings, and their children in August 2017. He survived by hiding in a vegetable patch. All he has left of his family are postage stamp size photos of his 3 nieces whose parents were also massacred. In the Bangladesh refugee camps he just hangs around. He is neither allowed to enter a school nor he is allowed to earn a livelihood.



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## OTHER NATIONS

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The unfriendly and insecure atmosphere in India impacts children’s education as well as mental health. This situation is true in most nations that unwillingly host Rohingya refugees. Nor is safe haven in Saudi Arabia secure, though the vast majority of Rohingya Muslims living in Saudi Arabia are descendants of those granted residency by King Faisal as a gesture of goodwill during a wave of persecution in the 1970s. The Rohingya in Saudi Arabia do not hold a passport from any country. Even the Arabic speaking children of refugees born in Saudi Arabia are not offered Saudi citizenship. Numbering somewhere between 60,000 and 200,000, the large Rohingya population is marginalized, the majority living in Mecca’s slums, selling vegetables, sweeping streets and working as porters, carpenters and unskilled labour. Rohingya children are not allowed in state funded schools, but Saudi donors fund separate charity schools.

Saudi charities have donated generously to the Rohingya cause. However, though KSrelief is at the forefront of refugee and IDP education in Syria it has mainly provided food and construction of camp facilities in Bangladesh, not education.<sup>39</sup>

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37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qmsZKPFJrU>

38 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/rohingya-run-schools-in-india-for-rejected-kids/84696#>

39 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1762571/saudi-arabia>

In recent years the Saudi government has begun jailing Rohingya for false documentation.<sup>40</sup> Its mistreatment of Rohingya refugees in jail received some global media attention as a result of leaked cell phone video footage.<sup>41</sup> In 2020 the Saudi Arabian government urged Bangladesh to take back some 54,000 Rohingya, but Bangladesh so far has resisted this demand.<sup>42</sup>

According to Ro Nay San Lwin, a leader of the Free Rohingya Coalition, “Historically, Saudi Arabia has given Rohingya residency papers despite having no proper travel documents, and it was a great help... But because Myanmar refuses to acknowledge Rohingya as citizens, the Rohingya have had no choice but to get travel papers from other countries to get to Saudi Arabia. But now there is growing pressure [on them] to procure a passport in order to renew these residency permits.”<sup>43</sup>

This is one of the makeshift madrasah in Kutupalong, Bangladesh, the largest refugee camp in the world.

Some Rohingya refugees live in this relatively large tent but in day time it doubles as a school for children.

This structure and type of school essentially defines 90% of all functioning educational facilities in the camp. Bamboo, straws and plastic sheets used for the hut require regular updating since a little wind can tear them into pieces.



Bangladesh has jailed more than a dozen Rohingya deported from Saudi Arabia for using fake documents to get to the kingdom - a move rights group Amnesty International has condemned. In 2020 UN Special Rapporteur to Burma Yanghee Lee condemned both governments, as well as India, for ignoring their international legal obligations.<sup>44</sup>

40 <https://www.stories.middleeasteye.net/trapped-rohingya-flee-saudi-arabia>

41 <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/why-is-saudi-arabia-deporting-rohingya-refugees-23403>

42 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-arabia-wont-send-rohingya-back-to-bangladesh/2173654>

43 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-rohingya-bangladesh-deportation-passports>

44 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/un-rapporteur-condemns-saudi-deportations-rohingya-bangladesh>

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## FOCUS ON BANGLADESH

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In Bangladesh, the national education system is one of the largest in the world, with 21.9 million children in kindergarten and primary school. Two percent of the gross domestic product (and 14.4% of the national budget) is spent on education.<sup>45</sup> Even before the pandemic's arrival in 2020 the sprawling educational system of Cox's Bazar was struggling, as falling incomes worsened school drop-out rates, which according to the World Bank are among the worst in the world.<sup>46</sup>

The government of Bangladesh has perceived the arrival of Rohingya refugees as an additional burden. Today, there are over one million Rohingya refugees residing in Cox's Bazar – as we have

noted, at least 600,000 of whom are children and young people in need of access to education.

● **The government of Bangladesh has perceived the arrival of Rohingya refugees as an additional burden.** ●

In previous years and decades, Bangladeshi schools had quietly admitted some Rohingya refugee children but since the 2017 influx, the central government has pressured educators to expel the students, on the grounds of national security.<sup>47</sup> Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission Chief Abul Kalam advised headmasters "to monitor strictly so that no Rohingya children can take education outside the camps or elsewhere in Bangladesh." (Reuters<sup>48</sup>) Even if they are born on Bangladesh soil, Rohingya children's rights to education were flatly rejected, despite the fact that Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This means that whatever teaching exists is to be found inside the camps. Below we will consider both the Rohingya-run schools and those run by NGOs, all constrained by government policies.

According to numerous experts in child development, without critical early childhood development (ECD) programming to protect children from the negative consequences of conflict and crisis, an entire generation is at risk of poor developmental outcomes that may follow them throughout their lives: lower academic achievement, reduced economic earnings, and lower levels of physical and mental health. Recognizing this, Bangladesh

authorities have since mid-2019 allowed humanitarian groups to provide younger children with a "learning competency framework

45 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6293360/>

46 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/10/13/Bangladesh-Rohingya-education>

47 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/01/bangladesh-rohingya-refugee-students-expelled>

48 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-education/rohingya-lost-generation-struggle-to-study-in-bangladesh-camps-idUSKCN1QZ0EA>



approach,” but this currently envisions only a few years of life skills lessons.<sup>49</sup>

To provide younger children with access to child protection services, play and early childhood learning, international donors, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies and the Education Can't Wait fund have supported learning centers run by UNICEF, Global Partnership for Education and many local NGO partners. The guiding document for humanitarian agencies is called the “NGOs Guidelines for Informal Education Programming.” According to the 2018 Joint Response Plan, a nine-month plan, the Education Sector planned to engage with 540,000 children and young adults, 9,000 teachers and 50,000 community members. Plans were made but not implemented, or were implemented in limited ways.



Rohingya girls learning the Quran in the Rohingya refugee camps. Camps have hut mosques every few blocks which are no different in structure than the residential huts. Compared to young Rohingya boys, young girls face tremendous challenges to receive their education.

In a 2018 study published in *Health and Human Rights Journal*, researchers reported that in late 2017, “a vast majority of Rohingya household members over the age of 15 (76.0%) reported having had no education, and 52.6% of Rohingya children under the age of 15 were not attending school... Literacy levels among Rohingya adults are very low, as is school enrollment.” They reported that BRAC was providing primary education through 200 learning centers for over 21,000 students. They were unable to access madrasas.

In another in depth study of implementation of Emergency Education Ashvina Patel describes the therapeutic nature of these sessions as observed in 2018. These rare descriptions of early childhood socialization/education in these refugee camps also point to logistical challenges, such as lessons that are too short, a lack of

<sup>49</sup> <https://nyaspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/nyas.13691>

discipline, unsafe living conditions and insufficient space for gender segregated latrines. Bangladeshi teachers are paid more than the Rohingya teachers, and they try to dominate.<sup>50</sup>

Patel notes that BRAC centers lose students because they fail to offer enough food, when compared to other informal learning centers, such as “Small Kindness Bangladesh” a Turkish NGO. The report also describes how many Rohingya refugee parents prefer to send their children to madrasas, because of the spiritual framework that gives meaning to their suffering. Madrasas generally do not permit older girls to attend and traditional gender roles are strongly guarded. NGOs like BRAC struggle to convince parents to send girls to their schools.

the International Rescue Committee observed that, “approximately 83 percent of adolescents and youth in Cox’s Bazar have no access to any educational or skills development activities”

By September 2019, the Global Partnership had supported “the establishment of 237 learning centers and the training of 474 teachers (including 213 female teachers), allowing more than 15,000 Rohingya children to be enrolled in education activities.”<sup>51</sup> Already by the end of July 2018, the Joint Education Needs Assessment identified a total of approximately 1,200 formal and informal learning centers serving 140,000 refugee children (including 69,000 girls) but warned that 276,000 “refugee learners (ages 3-24)” are not accessing any type of learning centers. At that time approximately 2,000 youth and adolescents had access to education, less than 2% of the 130,000 of the current refugee youth and adolescent population. The Assessment also reported that only 4% of adolescent girls attended, compared to 14% of adolescent boys.

Two years later, in its August 2020 report, the International Rescue Committee observed that, “approximately 83 percent of adolescents and youth in Cox’s Bazar have no access to any educational or skills development activities” and added that, “the protracted nature of the refugee situation requires a set of solutions that address children’s educational needs in the medium-to-long term.”<sup>52</sup>

There have been public complaints that a lack of coordination between United Nations offices needlessly delayed development of the new curriculum, based on the Burmese education model. Al Jazeera reported that, “Kenneth Russell, an education specialist at UNICEF Bangladesh, admitted to Al Jazeera that offices in Bangladesh and Myanmar could have worked more closely together to lobby the Myanmar government over the need for a curriculum.”<sup>53</sup>

50 <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2018/08/the-rohingya-in-coxs-bazar-when-the-stateless-seek-refuge/>

51 <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/rohingya-children-and-youth-must-continue-receive-education-services>

52 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-education/rohingya-lost-generation-struggle-to-study-in-bangladesh-camps-idUSKCN1QZ0EA>

53 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/7/un-ngos-accused-of-bungling-effort-to-educate-rohingya-children>

Burma Task Force interviews of NGO providers<sup>54</sup> in the camps confirm that there are limitations imposed on language, curriculum and extent of teaching. Abul Kashem, Executive Director of Help Cox's Bazar told us that, "We used to have the BRAC and UNICEF curriculum model. Now, the Bangladesh government has provided us with guidelines on the curriculum. Before 2017, we had Bangla and English but after 2017 we were given instructions to only teach Burmese and English language... The Government has given us particular rules on curriculum, we have to follow this curriculum... because we submit our reports with the budget in order

to continue our projects and missions," The "Camp In Charge", gives authority to establish a small school. We have a total of 10 schools, we used to have more before COVID."

The only higher education available in the camps is offered by the madrasahs curriculum of Darul Uloom Deoband. Their teachers are Rohingyas who either graduated directly from the Darul Uloom Deoband in India or have studied in Darul Uloom Ahmadiya in Rakhine Burma which follows Darul Uloom Deoband's curriculum. Darul Uloom Deoband is a historic Islamic seminary in India where the Deobandi movement began.



Mr Kashem notes that "Help Cox's Bazar is the only private development agency in Ukhia. I believe at the moment, among our children 60%, are literate and 40% still lack literacy or motivation to attend school." Except for English teachers, instructors are generally chosen from among the Rohingya, for their cultural competence. He adds that, "Bangladeshi and Rohingya people experience difficulty and frustration due to the language barriers. Many NGOs who come in don't know either language."

In another interview, Sohel Ahmed of the Bdesh Foundation told us that, "At Bdesh foundation, we would like to see a real education curriculum because right now we are only seeing the Ad Hoc model. We would like to see the Rohingyas get a Bangladeshi curriculum education, opportunities for higher education, college, or university. Many in the camps have aspirations and future goals, which we would like to support."

54 For more information on these 2021 interviews please see the Appendix at the end of the report



He adds that “We educate around 300 children ages 5 through 12 and we rotate teachers around the different learning centers. Pre-COVID the schedule was 4 days a week, and now we have it once a week on Fridays with full meals. At this point, after COVID, we are trying to work with the Bangladeshi Government with teachers’ training. We would like to work on a better communication method.”

Advocacy groups like the child rights organization Children on the Edge have begun to promote a “rights-based approach” to education. Working to provide education in 75 centers in partnership with the Mukti NGO in the Kutupalong camps, Children on the Edge takes its inspiration from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As its mission statement explains, “Being guided by the CRC means that instead of regarding children as passive objects of care and charity, they are seen as human beings with a distinct set of rights. As an organization we resource and support children to be agents of change in their own futures.”<sup>55</sup>

Some NGO educators have embraced the need for “Know Your Rights” empowerment, especially for Rohingya women. HELP Cox’s Bazar organized 60 “yard meetings” for women “creating a harmonious environment” through the formation of domestic violence prevention committees. Executive Director Abul Kalesh of the HELP Cox’s Bazar suggests that, “Education is not being utilized as much as it needs to and needs to be more “hands-on”. ... Human trafficking awareness, classes should be taught to women for protecting themselves, Men and women need to be taught about how to respect women, how to behave with them and morals in general. Some of the Rohingya men’s behavior is unacceptable. For example: They force an 11 year old to marry a man just because they believe they can.”

Mr Kalesh adds that, “Also many of the men are strict and have restrictions on who can speak to the women and what kind of power women should have... We provide counseling, we get women to counsel them, to teach them about sex education and resources that exists for them in hospitals we work with. We want to provide them with maternity support.... Teenage women are at risk, they have to marry out of protection from the risk of trafficking, Education is very important. Although some NGOs have built “space for women” this does not help or create any long term assistance or guidance.”

Speaking with us in early 2021, Bdesh Foundation’s Mr Ahmed observes, “It’s important to know that when children don’t get an education or don’t stay busy with their time in school, it leads them to crimes, wrong activities, and the wrong crowd. We want to focus on giving a proper education so they do not become a lost generation.”

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55 <https://www.childrenontheedge.org/bangladesh-education-for-rohingya-refugee-children.html>

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## FEARS OF A LOST GENERATION

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Along the same lines, The Norwegian Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) has published a number of studies. For example, the “We Must Prevent a Lost Generation: Community-led Education in Rohingya Camps.”<sup>56</sup>

In 2019, increasing concerns about a “lost generation” of Rohingya had spread from the Rohingya themselves to the NGO community, media and to the Bangladesh government. With the government’s announcement of the pilot program in early 2020 there was a brief moment of hope that educational programs would become more widely available and supported.

The only higher education available in the camps is offered by the madrasahs curriculum of Darul Uloom Deoband. Their teachers are Rohingyas who either graduated directly from the Darul Uloom Deoband in India or have studied in Darul Uloom Ahmadiya in Rakhine Burma which follows Darul Uloom Deoband’s curriculum. Darul Uloom Deoband is a historic Islamic seminary in India where the Deobandi movement began.



The phrase “lost generation” was picked up by Amnesty International<sup>57</sup> and by then media<sup>58</sup>, apparently leading to the announcement in January 2020: “We don’t want a lost generation of Rohingya. We want them to have education. They will follow the Myanmar curricula,” the country’s foreign minister, AK Abdul Momen, told reporters.”<sup>59</sup>

As we previously noted, Human Rights Watch (HRW) welcomed the pilot program announced in early 2020 but observed that none of the Rohingya children receiving services “have access to certified, formal primary or secondary education, or to university or college.” Moreover, it was unclear if plans to create a pilot program for 10,000 students would be formally accredited or be scalable to reach the other 400,000 children in need. Human Rights Watch

56 <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=11387>

57 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/empower-rohingya-children-with-education/>

58 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-education/rohingya-lost-generation-struggle-to-study-in-bangladesh-camps-idUSKCN1QZ0EA>

59 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jan/29/bangladesh-grants-rohingya-refugee-children-access-to-education>

● **“[When we were still in Myanmar], we wanted to really think about how to improve our poor community. No government teachers came to teach our children after 2012, and we all volunteered to teach in order to avoid a lost generation. So when we arrived to Bangladesh we already had a platform. We were thinking that we need to keep going here and created a volunteer-run learning center.”– Khin Maung, Central Committee Member, Rohingya Community Development Committee.**

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also mentioned the lack of educational services for adolescents, “the age range most at risk of criminal exploitation.” In addition, Bangladesh plans to relocate up to 100,000 Rohingya to the isolated island of Bhasan Char may eventually include education but at least 33 children living there in 2020 were denied any education whatsoever.<sup>60</sup>

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## **ROHINGYA VOICE & ROLES**

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“[When we were still in Myanmar], we wanted to really think about how to improve our poor community. No government teachers came to teach our children after 2012, and we all volunteered to teach in order to avoid a lost generation. So when we arrived to Bangladesh we already had a platform. We were thinking that we need to keep going here and created a volunteer-run learning center.”–Khin Maung, Central Committee Member, Rohingya Community Development Committee.<sup>61</sup>

As we have previously described, even before arrival in Bangladesh, some educated Rohingya had created networks for general education, private schools operating in homes, maktabas and madrassas. In the sprawling camps in Cox’s Bazar, these informal schools have mainly assisted primary level students. PRIO Survey respondents indicate that madrassas regularly combine religious instruction with other basic lessons. These schools and centers are officially ineligible to receive funding from overseas donors, which means that teachers are not regularly paid.

While the Bangladeshi government puts extraordinary limitations on formal education, mosques are able to provide basic religious education to Rohingya refugees. In the camps, sometimes one can find two small mosques within a two minute walk. These structures serve many purposes including community education.

Bangladesh already has an elaborate six level system of madrasah education controlled by the government with a standardized curriculum. The Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board ensures that this curriculum will include humanities, science, languages, business and technical education. The certificates and degrees are recognized as equivalent to those of secular public schools and colleges.

This system may shape the madrasah system in the camps, where mosques are already teaching basic subjects as well as higher levels of madrasah level education. Both curriculums in Bangladesh and the refugee camps are derived from the Darul Uloom Deoband curriculum. Their teachers are generally Rohingya who either graduated directly from the Darul Uloom Deoband in India or have

60 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/29/step-forward-10000-rohingya-refugee-children>

61 P. 31 PRIO report



studied in Darul Uloom Ahmadia in Rakhine Burma which follows Darul Uloom Deoband's curriculum. Darul Uloom Deoband is a historic Islamic seminary in India where the Deobandi movement began. Informed by Sufi traditions, its major leaders engaged with Gandhi and his Congress party instead of with the Muslim League movement for Pakistan.

Moreover, noting the social standing of these Rohingya volunteer teachers, researcher Jessica Olney notes, "this cadre of community educators represents a wellspring of potential support to help humanitarian agencies engage more children in educational activities, promote girls' education, advise the development of new curriculum, advise on general education planning, and help prevent a lost generation overall. The apparent lack of consultation and engagement with these networks thus far indicates that their potential contributions to formal education programming are being overlooked. This has fueled negative views amongst these networks toward camp education agencies."

This same study notes that "Only two of the networks surveyed had received material or financial support from NGOs working in the camps. Few had met or spoken with any NGO staff, and none had been consulted by the education sector to give inputs on education planning."

Researchers reported that "Many respondents spoke at length about the importance of refugee-led education. They place a strong value on the community's ability to educate its own children and locate a sense of dignity in contributing to camp education."

As previously noted, the government has also forbidden centers from teaching the Bangladesh curriculum, as it wishes students to return to Rakhine State and not integrate into Bangladesh society. Most Rohingya leaders seem to support this approach to maintain a sense of belonging to their homeland but request the addition of Bangla and English to the curriculum. Since few NGO personnel have Burmese language skills, the elder teachers doubted the efficacy of the new curriculum drafting process and expressed doubts regarding early childhood learning centers, which appear to them unstructured playrooms. In fact, NGO leaders like Alice Allbright of GPE are on record saying the same thing, that such centers "don't replace a formal and comprehensive education that can open the path to good jobs and a brighter future for these young people." Though it is government policy that has stood in the way, a confidence building process is still needed to overcome tensions and identify areas for collaboration.

Community relations matter. As Mr Abul Kalesh told us in his interview, "Among the Rohingyas there are known leaders, imams, educated men who I focused on, providing support through direct funds because they were chair, leaders, and teachers in the Rohingyas community. We also built small clinics and relationships with hospitals to treat those in need of medical assistance. When it

comes to education, we have to encourage and remind parents the importance of sending their kids to school.”

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## **PANDEMIC CHALLENGES**

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The coronavirus became a global pandemic only weeks after the announcement of the new pilot project, and the Bangladesh Government shut down all schools in the camps. According to an August 2020 International Rescue Committee (IRC) report, “the pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on education around the world, with the closure of teaching institutions impacting an estimated 91 percent of students – approximately 1.6 billion children and young people.” In this report the IRC demonstrates how informal education programming in Cox’s Bazar is constrained by a number of major challenges: “limited and short-term funding; low quality of teaching; program restrictions and approval delays; infrastructural limitations; and low levels of enrollment and student retention: all challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak and response.”<sup>62</sup>

In the camps of Cox’s Bazar, government restrictions have left informal education by humanitarian agencies as the only pathway to any form of education. However, the pilot program to expand services was placed on hold due to government lockdown measures, with no plans to reinstate, until learning centers are allowed to re-open, a date which has not yet been set.

As NGO Executive Director Mr Kashem told us in early February 2021, “Schools were closed for a long time. Government had shut down schools, locked down due to a pandemic. We will reopen the schools in the camps when the government decides to allow the pandemic restrictions to be removed for everyone. At the moment, all of Bangladesh has kept the schools closed until further notice from the government.”

During much of 2020 NGOs and Rohingya leaders faced difficulty spreading prevention information regarding COVID-19 due to the internet ban enforced by the Government of Bangladesh since September 2019, limiting access to mobile data and internet communications in the refugee camps. Health education efforts have to rely on small vehicles with loudspeakers. At the same time, community health workers find it difficult to receive information in the camps regarding any individual who may have COVID-19 symptoms. In this uncertain situation, rumours have been rife among the refugee population regarding COVID-19. Refugees fear being abducted or even killed while being taken to isolation centers.<sup>63</sup>

62 <https://www.rescue.org/report/no-time-lose-urgent-call-access-quality-education-rohingya-children-coxs-bazar>

63 <https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/in-bangladesh-internet-restrictions-rumours-worsen-covid-19-fears-in-rohingya-camps-8514181.html>

This sort of a fearful and uncertain situation will have a debilitating impact on the mental health of an already traumatized population. It also limits online learning options. Creative pre-COVID-19 pilot projects by Sesame Street and others suggest that online and offline, tablet based education is possible. An online approach may be uniquely effective in reaching adolescent girls, given the cultural restrictions.

For example, noting that this young refugee cohort does not attend school, Save the Children “designed the Adolescent Girls Non-Formal Education in Emergency Adolescent Girls Non-Formal Education in Emergency program, to help girls continue their education. Utilising the open source Moodle LMS, the vulnerable group of girls were able to increase their literacy and numeracy skills and improve their knowledge of technology through collaborative online learning and tutor engagement.”<sup>64</sup> Though this particular project uses technology accessible from mobile devices even when the internet connection isn’t strong or stable, sustained access to education will be impossible without internet service, mobile phone restrictions and electricity outages.<sup>65</sup>

Mr Sohel Ahmed of Bdesh told us in early 2021, “This is where we see a huge potential. There are government restrictions and internet monitoring by the government. Actually, until 3 months ago, the internet was very restricted in the camps, most got news from the mobile phone. Now that the restriction has been lifted, we have been able to communicate from the camps. We believe this has huge potential. Distance-learning would be great as supplemental support from students in the U.S. Although, there is limited access to electricity in the camps, it gets dangerous and we are also asked to leave after 4:00 pm. However solar power is a good alternative to provide them with the distance learning devices or allow access to remote learning.”

And another NGO leader told us, “We have zoom meetings with human rights organizations inside the camps... to provide training about their rights as Rohingya and to give them updates. In the past due to tensions rising in the camps, they were denied access to 4G internet. But, now they have full internet and 4G access on the phone. There is an NGO who focuses on children’s rights and abuse prevention, their leaders were given access.”

Strong concerns still exist among some Rohingya refugees regarding the prospect of coerced relocation to Bhasan Char, and mixed feelings about this option can be found among NGOs, However, there are apparently some signs of hope to be found in the government’s belated lifting of harsh restrictions on internet service. During the last three years, unnecessarily difficult

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64 <https://moodle.com/news/save-the-children-utilise-moodle-to-support-young-girls-future-in-bangladesh/>

65 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7546100/>



conditions have encouraged NGO innovation as well as self-help among the Rohingya themselves. Besides assisting the younger children, United Nations agencies have even offered skills training for some adults. For example, UNHCR claims to have improved agricultural skills and provided seeds to 40,000 families during the pandemic.<sup>66</sup> But adolescents remain particularly at risk and underserved.

**If the Rohingya cannot follow the Bangladesh teaching curriculum, will the Burmese curriculum be effective? Will it allow them to go to college? Will it be acknowledged by the international community? Can the schools in the camp provide high school certificates certified by the Bangladesh government or the International community? Can the Rohingya refugees go to college if they finish high school in the camp?"**

## **QUESTIONS & CONCLUSIONS**

Burma Task Force Program Associate Imran Hoque,<sup>67</sup> a Rohingya refugee, observes that, "Refugees feel hopeless. Why? An uncertain future is a major factor. We need to understand this idea. How can we make refugees comprehend that education will bring stability and certainty in their lives? Quite often they cannot think about this because their world has become very small. Therefore we have the responsibility to improve the system. There are many questions. If the Rohingya cannot follow the Bangladesh teaching curriculum, will the Burmese curriculum be effective? Will it allow them to go to college? Will it be acknowledged by the international community? Can the schools in the camp provide high school certificates certified by the Bangladesh government or the International community? Can the Rohingya refugees go to college if they finish high school in the camp?"

Indeed, many important questions remain unresolved. In their homeland the Rohingya have been systematically deprived of education, hope and social development over more than two generations. It is unacceptable that this deprivation has continued even in internationally funded camps in Bangladesh. Many nations have failed to sign international conventions on refugee rights, or simply pretend Rohingya are not refugees. Legal tricks have allowed not only Bangladesh, but nearly all host countries, to treat Rohingya as if these men, women and children are brought to their shores as opportunists, not refugees fleeing destruction in a genocide.<sup>68</sup> Rohingya are treated as economic burdens, instead of being recognized for their human potential.

Yes, the COVID 19 pandemic has made the crisis of Rohingya refugee education worse. Indeed, the failure to provide education to refugees is a larger, global problem. But this failure of political will predates the pandemic. "Half of the world's refugee children were already out of school," said Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>69</sup> Based on 2019 reports from 12 countries hosting

66 <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2021/5/60a26da14/pandemic-hit-rohingya-refugees-local-bangladeshis-help-grow-food.html>

67 <https://www.burmataskforce.org/emp-065-finds-his-voice-the-education-of-a-rohingya-writer/>

68 <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/few-rights-and-little-progress-rohingya-bangladesh>

69 <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2020/9/5f508f5b4/coronavirus-dire-threat-refugee-education.html>

more than half of the world's refugee children, there was 77% gross enrollment in primary school, but only 31% of youth are enrolled in secondary school. At the level of higher education, only 3% of refugee youth are enrolled.

The refugee education crisis is vast, but action can be local. There are over 70 million displaced people in the world today that require our attention. But not all these millions are stateless, like the Rohingya can be considered to be, despite their homeland in Rakhine State. Most refugees are not fleeing genocidal destruction perpetrated over many years through violence and systematic repression. In so systematically betraying the hopes of vulnerable Rohingya refugees, and in ignoring the plight of the stateless, the international community is complicit in genocide.

As the world confronts the damage done to the Rohingya and to others, the genocidal Myanmar military must be held accountable, along with those nations and corporations that support it with arms and trade. The failure to fully hold the Burmese authorities accountable after the mass atrocities of 2016 and 2017 only emboldened Tatmadaw extremists to take full control over the nation.

Though the recent military coup is a clear sign that Rohingya repatriation will not happen in the next few years, there are signs of hope in the resistance of the diverse people of Burma and their willingness to sacrifice to restore democracy. The Burmese military has shut down the Burmese educational system in past decades, and together with the pandemic, the current conflict will continue to interrupt school for millions in the months to come.

However, there is a hope in the recent recognition by some Burmese that Rohingya have rights. Many ethnic communities in Burma have suffered from years of conflict and oppression. A unified resistance must include all ethnic and religious groups, including the Rohingya.<sup>70</sup> Trust building may take time, but there may be little time to lose.

It is time to stop oppressing the Rohingya people.  
Allow them a future.

### **Let Rohingya Learn.**

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/04/ousted-myanmar-politicians-call-for-rohingya-to-join-fight-against-junta>

## **BRIEF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION**

### **Bangladesh Government**

- Recognize Rohingya right to education
- Allow full educational opportunities for Rohingya refugees by lifting all restrictions to their instruction levels, choice of language, and curriculum
- Maintain internet and mobile phone access in camps
- Partner with Rohingya leadership in camps, including youth leaders
- Allow donor funds to flow into Rohingya schools, not limited to Learning Centers
- Allow certification for all levels of education

### **Indian Government**

- End threats against Rohingya and other refugees
- Allow Rohingya refugees the same status as Hindus from neighboring countries
- End restrictions of movement and employment while ensuring health of refugees
- End all deportations to Burma during post coup crisis
- Support refugee schooling

### **Malaysian Government**

- Allow refugee boats to land
- End restrictions on legal employment
- Support refugee schooling

### **United Nations**

- Ask member nations to lift restrictions on Rohingya education in their countries
- Fully fund and support UNICEF, UNHCR and other services for Rohingya children
- Require nations to comply with refugee compacts and conventions they have signed
- Ensure all Rohingya refugees are officially registered and obtain legal documentation
- Advocate more strongly for Rohingya rights and for other stateless peoples
- Implement R2P Principles in Addressing Genocide and Military Coup in Burma

### **USA & Other Donor Nations**

- Ensure adequate funds are earmarked for Rohingya education in the camps
- Ensure plan is developed for access to higher education for both boys and girls
- Support multilateral engagement with the democracy movement in Burma to ensure full Rohingya acceptance

### **Burma/Myanmar**

- Restore all rights to the Rohingya people
- Restore a fully inclusive democracy and justice for all







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