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The Challenges Facing Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh
at a Time When US AID has Been Cut Drastically

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL (UNSC)

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Background

Geography of Rohingya refugee crisis



Source: Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

The Rohingya ethnic group is the world's most persecuted ethnic minority according to the United Nations. Since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the government has persecuted and restricted the rights of the Rohingya. During a 1962 military coup, they were labelled as foreigners and a threat to Burmese identity, despite identification and ration cards confirming citizenship, as well as

the presence of Rohingyas in the area for hundreds of years. The 1982 Citizenship Act granted

citizenship to 135 nationals but officially disenfranchised the Rohingya people, rendering them stateless. There have been five key displacement events of the Rohingya people from Myanmar, the vast majority of whom have settled in refugee camps in Bangladesh. The first was the 1978 military operation 'Dragon King', which expelled 250,000 Rohingya, with the second being the 1991-92 'Operation Clean and Beautiful Nations', which expelled an additional 200,000. A 2012 operation led to the expulsion of 120,000 Rohingyas, 87,000 more were displaced in 2016, and the largest displacement took place in the Clearance Operation beginning in August 2017 through which an estimated 750,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar, with the majority coming from Rakhine state¹. Prior to 2017, Rohingyas residing in the camps in Bangladesh were known as refugees but now all are designated "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals"². Through these deportations, Rohingya refugees experienced oppression, militarized and sexualized violence, and what is suspected to amount to genocide and crimes against humanity under international law.³

State of the Crisis Since 2017

As of 2025, over 1.2 million refugees were living in the Cox's Bazar area of Bangladesh, mainly in the Kutupalong and Nayapara camps, making this the most populated refugee camp area in the world⁴. Ongoing military conflict in Myanmar is exacerbating the situation, and more refugees are continuing to flee to Bangladesh. Conditions in these camps are dire and worsening amid funding declines, with no durable solution in the foreseeable future from the Bangladesh government, the Myanmar government, or the international community. Around 630,000 Rohingyas remain in Rakhine, continuing to face discriminatory policies and practices.⁵⁶ This includes over 100,000 internally displaced people.⁷

As stateless individuals, Rohingyas are vulnerable to human rights abuses disguised as raids by law enforcement, justified by arbitrary suspicion and accusation. Women are especially vulnerable to continued sexual violence within these camps. The camps at Cox's Bazar are surrounded by barbed wire, and individuals would be punished for leaving camp without a permit, evidenced by dozens killed in shootouts with Bangladesh.⁸ Over half of the refugees in these camps are under the age of 18, and have few to no opportunities for education and skill-building to provide them with meaningful futures.⁹ The Bangladesh government has also limited the opportunities of refugees to participate in income-generating activities. As the crisis stretches on, challenges continue to compound, especially as global funding is declining. The host community in Bangladesh is becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the refugee camps as the crisis continues. When the first waves of refugees came to Bangladesh in the late 20th century, Bangladesh citizens overwhelmingly welcomed the Rohingyas, as neighbours and fellow Muslims. However, more recently, refugees have been perceived to be taking jobs from host community members, and the magnitude of aid reaching Rohingya camps has created a sense of disparity among a local population who was already struggling with widespread poverty.¹⁰ The government of Bangladesh aims to repatriate the Rohingyas, which they have demonstrated through restrictions on livelihood activities and access to formal education, as well as maintaining temporary facilities and infrastructure in camps. The government of Bangladesh is grappling with worsening public sentiment towards refugees, a lack of cooperation from the Myanmar government, and a lack of resettlement opportunities from the international community.

In light of growing resentment towards refugees in Bangladesh, the government opened Bhasan Char island for resettlement in 2020, where about 30,000 refugees have moved. Bangladesh

claims this resettlement is completely voluntary, although the United Nations, the European Union, and international human rights organizations say that some refugees were coerced. Bhasan Char is an island that has been in existence for about 20 years and no population has lived there before, so the settlement was designed specifically for the Rohingyas. The structures are better than the camps on the mainland with the settlements being more spacious than the UN standards for refugees, and further features of the island including cyclone centres to accommodate the entire population, community amenities, a port station for transport, and agricultural and industrial opportunities.¹¹ However, most refugees do not want to move to Bhasan Char as they have not been well informed of the scope and facilities, fear isolation and a loss of mobility, and are concerned by the lack of trust from the UN and international community, as many human rights organizations and international entities have been barred from entering.¹²

In November 2018 and August 2019, the Bangladesh and Myanmar governments attempted two waves of repatriation, although no Rohingyas went back. Many Rohingya say they would be happy to return to Myanmar if their conditions were granted – legal recognition amid conferring citizenship, social safety through deployment of UN peace troops, and human dignity and rights. Many also say they would be happy to move to Bhasan Char if that could be proved to be a permanent home.¹³ To the Rohingya, resettlement must include finding a permanent home, for which a durable solution has not yet been found by Myanmar, Bangladesh, or anyone in the international community.

Challenges for Rohingya Refugees Amid USAID Cuts

Since 2017, the response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh has depended heavily on international humanitarian aid, with the United States serving as one of the largest single contributors primarily through USAID.¹⁴ Their funding has supported food assistance,

healthcare access, and educational opportunities.¹⁵ As global humanitarian budgets have tightened and the U.S. provision through USAID has been cut, the effects are being felt across all sectors for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.¹⁶

Food assistance is the foundation for survival in Cox's Bazar. Rohingya refugees are generally prohibited from formal employment and have very limited ability to generate income outside of informal activities within the refugee camps.¹⁷ As a result, they heavily rely on humanitarian food distributions which largely come from international donors, including USAID. Recent funding cuts have led to major reductions in food rations, cutting monthly assistance levels nearly by half.¹⁸ These reductions significantly increase the risks of malnutrition, particularly for children, pregnant women, and elderly refugees. In a context where livelihoods are restricted at the structural level, the dismantling of USAID and drawbacks on other donor funding directly heighten household food insecurity for Rohingya refugees.¹⁹

Education services in the camps have also been affected by the funding cuts. Humanitarian education programming provides structured learning opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya children. Funding reductions have led to the scaling back of some learning centers in Cox's Bazar and reduced access to learning materials and educators for prospective students.²⁰

When education opportunities diminish, the effects go beyond just classroom learning. Young teenagers face increased risks of child labour, early marriage, and trafficking when these services disappear.²¹ In an environment like a refugee camp, where

opportunities are already constrained, sustained funding is essential for creating a healthy and educated future generation.

Healthcare services in Cox's Bazar are similarly dependent on this sustained international financing. Clinics provide primary care, maternal services, vaccination campaigns, and treatment

for common diseases in these densely populated conditions.²² Research indicates that a substantial proportion of Rohingya households already experience unmet healthcare needs.²³ Funding instability places additional strain on the aforementioned facilities, limiting medicine availability and outreach services.²⁴ At the same time, reductions in food assistance compound health risks. Malnutrition increases vulnerability to disease outbreaks in these refugee camps where the population is so dense.²⁵ Water and sanitation systems - which are also supported through USAID - require continued maintenance in order to prevent outbreaks of waterborne diseases. Without this vital funding, healthcare systems in Cox's Bazar lose even more ability to attempt to support the needs of Rohingya refugees.

Bangladesh has hosted over one million Rohingya refugees for eight years now.²⁶ International assistance like USAID has helped offset the economic and environmental strain that is placed on host communities in Cox's Bazar.²⁷ When major donors like the United States reduce contributions, the burden shifts more heavily onto local authorities and communities who are already facing resource constraints. Declining funding risks intensifying competition over employment opportunities, food systems, and healthcare services, potentially contributing to increased tensions between refugee and host populations.²⁸

Role of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

The United Nations Security Council's interaction with Myanmar and the Rohingya crisis has been a story of periodic attention and limited implementation. In 2007, the Security Council failed to adopt a draft resolution addressing human rights conditions in Myanmar after China and Russia had vetoed the proposal. This early instance demonstrated how geopolitical divisions among permanent members have restrained coordinated collective action. Following the mass displacement of Rohingya in 2017, the Security Council convened emergency discussions and

issued a presidential statement condemning the violence and calling for humanitarian access. However, it did not impose binding sanctions or authorize any real enforcement measures. This failure to initiate a proper response faced criticism by human rights organizations.²⁹In 2022, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2669, which called for an end to violence and the release of political prisoners in Myanmar. While this was symbolically significant, the resolution did not establish strong enforcement mechanisms but passed as a result of abstentions from China and Russia. Overall, the Security Council's record reflects a recognition of the crisis but very limited action due to divisions among permanent members. Immediate action is necessary to prevent further deterioration of the conditions in Cox's Bazar following the dismantling of USAID. Emergency financing for potential alternative donors is essential to prioritize life-saving sectors such as food assistance and healthcare. In addition, increased coordination among UN agencies and NGOs is critical in stabilizing these services and providing a sustainable solution for Rohingya settlement. Without accelerated intervention, the funding shortfalls resulting from the closure of USAID risk worsening malnutrition, available healthcare, and education opportunities for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

More information about the UNSC can be found here: <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en>

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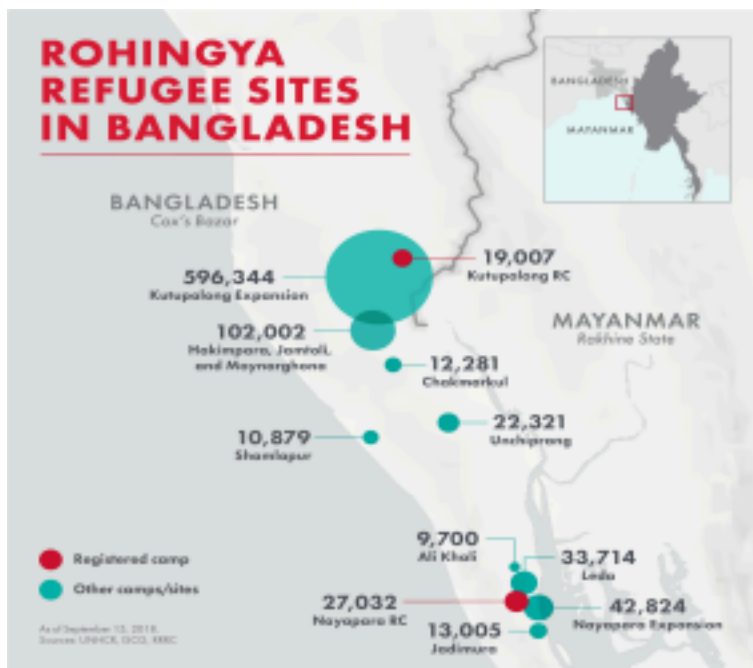
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Hello! My name is Eyad, and I'm a third year in university studying international education studies. If you have any questions, you can contact me at: abid3486@mylaurier.ca.

Hello! My name is Jann and I am one of the authors of the briefing notes provided about Rohingya refugees. I am currently a 3rd year undergraduate in the program “International Education Studies”, where I aspire to be an international teacher and teach abroad.

Introduction and Background



The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim-minority group native to Myanmar, who have been denied citizenship in Myanmar as a result of the 1982 Citizenship Act.¹ As a result, the Rohingya have faced severe discrimination in Myanmar for decades due to their statelessness, preventing them from accessing necessary political and

social rights.² Due to rising violence against the Rohingya, migration to Bangladesh was a necessity for many in previous decades. However, their most significant exodus took place in

2017, as a result of ethnic cleansing within Myanmar's Rakhine state,³ forcing 700,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh.⁴ Currently, refugees live in prolonged camp conditions with severe restrictions on movement, employment, education, and long-term settlement⁵

Why Refugee Status Matters

In 2025, there were more than 3.5 million internally displaced Rohingyas in Myanmar and more than 1 million living in Bangladesh with a stateless status, mostly spread across 34 refugee camps in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, primarily in the Kutupalong refugee camp,⁶ hosting approximately 600,000 Rohingyas as the largest refugee camp in the world.⁷ As a result of this, the Rohingya community places a significant strain on local infrastructure and social services.⁸ The Rohingya's circumstances are further complicated due to many barriers to attaining refugee status in Bangladesh. Much of this legacy has been defined by Bangladesh's non-signatory status to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.⁹ This has significant implications as refugees who are not given status are unable to work, have limited protection, and limited mobility. As a result, 95% of Rohingya in Bangladesh rely on humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ Refugee experiences in these camps vary significantly by registration status. Registered refugees (RRs) gain recognition through collaborative efforts by the UNHCR and Bangladeshi government.¹¹ However, a significant number of Rohingya refugees are non-registered (NRRs). NRRs face significant difficulty in accessing food, health services, and civil rights, out of fear of authorities. Additionally, due to their lack of legal status, NRRs have severely limited access to formal pathways for a safer future, significantly more susceptible to exploitation, trafficking, forced labour, and gender-based violence.¹²

Access to Education

According to International Law, education is a fundamental human right¹³ and it is

essential for development as a life-saving, sustaining, and life-long process that should consistently be provided to students, particularly children.¹⁴ However, educational services provided in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have an unreliable history. For instance, five months after the 2017 influx of refugees in Bangladesh, only 24,000 had adequate access to education provided by humanitarian services out of the 625,000 aged 3-24, consisting of 50% of the refugee population¹⁵(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20004508.2020.1823121#abstract>). As a result of the Bangladeshi government's insistence on the repatriation of the Rohingyas, they are not permitted to attend Bangladeshi schools or live outside refugee camps, and permanent formal schools have not been constructed in refugee camps,¹⁶resulting in informal education mainly provided through unaccredited classes in Temporary Learning Centres (TLCs) and Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs). These structures were still not enough, as 3,000 temporary learning centres were required to reach the targets of 370,000 children by the initial six-month Humanitarian Response Plan after the 2017 influx¹⁷. However, in January 2018, camp managers announced that due to the lack of space, additional TLCs could not be built.¹⁸ Later, in 2023, approximately 300,000 students had access to education through 5,000 TLCs, leaving 16% of children aged 3-14 and 81% of youth aged 15-24 without access to education.¹⁹

Furthermore, school time is often shortened to 2 hours a day due to a lack of resources.²⁰ This is significant as educational gaps exacerbate crises of child labour, human trafficking, sexual abuse, and extremist ideologies.²¹

Access to Healthcare

Similarly, healthcare provisions are under pressure due to inconsistent financing and humanitarian assistance. The healthcare response carried out in the Cox's Bazar camps is done

through a Joint Response Plan, which involves the collaboration of the Government of Bangladesh, UN bodies, and NGOs.²² Although many actors are involved in the delivery of healthcare, significant gaps remain in the funding required and the funding received. In 2017, JRP representatives required CAD\$ 150 million, but only around CAD\$ 5 million of aid was received.²³ Later, in 2023, although significant funding was received, there was still a CAD\$ 40 million gap. Additionally, healthcare actors report that the donor funding received in 2018 was around CAD\$ 63 million, and will decrease by approximately 50-60% in 2023.²⁴

Overall, the short-term nature of healthcare funding during conflicts has been poorly planned for the protracted nature of the circumstances of the Rohingya. As a result of the extended nature of this conflict, healthcare actors will need to accumulate more funding to provide healthcare assistance to those with chronic illnesses, as the immediate emergency has shifted to a prolonged one.²⁵

What is the United Nations Security Council? (UNSC).

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is one of six main bodies of the United Nations. UNSC was created in order to prevent future global conflicts and maintain peace and security. In the United Nations, the Security Council is the organization's most powerful body responsible for maintaining international peace and security.²⁶ The UNSC's goals focus on diplomatic conflict resolution, overseeing peacekeeping operations, and responding to threats to peace by recommending peaceful settlements, sanctioning aggressors, or authorizing enforcement measures.²⁷ Lastly, the council is composed of fifteen member states: five permanent members like the United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom, which hold veto power, and ten non-permanent members who are elected and have no veto rights.²⁸

What is USAID? What does USAID do?

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is the United States of America's primary foreign aid and development agency. It was created in 1961 to help countries in need who are facing humanitarian crises, supporting marginalized communities, and the developments of proper access to health, food, and clean water. Funding is acquired by the department through governmental funding and collaborations with NGOs worldwide. Historically, USAID has contributed to over 40 % of global foreign assistance and saved millions of lives through initiatives such as HIV/AIDS control and infectious disease reduction.²⁹

During 2024, it was reported that USAID received a budget of \$44 billion dollars from the federal budget, or around 0.4% of the total budget.³⁰ However, USAID was cut beginning in early 2025 under the Trump administration's foreign aid overhaul. As a result, roughly 83 % of the programs within USAID were cancelled, halting billions in assistance, which also led to mass layoffs and program terminations.³¹ With recent data, during the year 2025, it was reported that USAID received a total of \$30 billion, or only 0.3% of the federal budget. Current data suggests that in the current year of 2026, USAID is estimated to only receive \$20 billion dollars of funding, or only 0.2% of the federal budget.³² This is a major cut of funding. As for its effects, the aid reductions have affected Rohingya refugees by contributing to the collapse of education and protection services. With the lack of support, the emergence of child marriage, exploitation, and trafficking began to rise due to families losing the necessary aid to help them.³³ **Why did the United States cut funding?**

The main driving factor of the funding cuts was primarily driven by the Trump Administration's "America First" philosophy in this context, which says that foreign aid should deliver direct and immediate benefits to the country rather than being spent on long term

outcomes.³⁴ The Trump administration viewed foreign aid as an unfair burden and argued that the U.S. paid too much for global leadership with no return. When questioned about the value of aid, Trump stated that the U.S. was “the world’s largest giver of foreign aid” while receiving little in return.³⁵

Afterwards, Trump declared that the U.S. would “only give foreign aid to those who respect us and, frankly, are our friends.”³⁶ The second reasoning for the cut was to prioritize domestic interests and taxpayer accountability over multilateralism and humanitarian commitments. The Trump administration then proposed budget requests that called for cuts of about 30% to the State Department and USAID funding.³⁷ This shows a belief that foreign aid did not sufficiently serve U.S. national security or economic interests. The last reason for cutting USAID was to reduce the independence of foreign aid institutions. As a result, the Trump administration tried to unite or eliminate long-standing aid programs and organizations by stating that foreign assistance should only be temporary and eventually “end the need for foreign assistance.”

What is the result of the funding Cut on the Rohingya?

The funding cuts have had severe and wide-ranging consequences for Rohingya refugees living in camps in Cox’s Bazar, Ukhiya and Teknaf, Bangladesh. These camps are now experiencing significantly worsening food security, health conditions, livelihoods, education, and overall well-being. One of the most immediate results has been the reduction in food assistance. Although the Trump administration fully cut funding in 2025, the funding being received was already short in the years prior to 2025. In 2023, monthly food rations were cut from around \$12.50 USD to \$8 USD per person, which had a direct impact that sharply reduced dietary intake and quality for refugees who rely almost entirely on humanitarian aid for survival. This led to

about 72% of Rohingya households falling below the minimum food expenditure level while global acute malnutrition reached 15.1%, which is the highest since 2017.

The results of these cuts forced many refugees to adopt harmful coping strategies for survival, which often included skipping meals, eating reduced portion sizes, and borrowing food or money to survive.⁴⁰ Current reports now show that organizations and aid workers are being forced to budget their spending, which is proving to be difficult as they make “impossible choices between feeding people and providing healthcare or education.”⁴¹ The further cutting of funding has also weakened health and nutrition services in the camps. These reduced budgets have led to fewer health posts, shortages of medical supplies, and overburdened clinics. Camps from Ukhiya and Teknaf have been showing reports of malnutrition rates escalating notably, and health systems are now struggling to meet rising demand under constrained resources.⁴² In addition to food, the funding cuts to water, sanitation, and hygiene have also increased public health risks. Approximately 18% of refugees now receive less than the minimum 20 litres of water per day, while sanitation facilities in several camps “fall short of acceptable standards.”⁴³ These worsening conditions are now contributing to outbreaks of acute watery diarrhea and other preventable diseases that are now endangering each refugee’s health.⁴⁴

Besides the necessities, economic insecurities have intensified due to these funding reductions that have limited livelihood opportunities within the camps. Due to a lack of funding, the refugees are now facing restricted access to income-generating opportunities, alongside the problem of wage rates dropping significantly.

To put it into perspective, wages have now declined from around 550 Bangladeshi Taka (\$4.5 USD) to as low as 300–350 Taka (\$2.5 USD) and as a result, deepening poverty and

dependency on aid.⁴⁵ Due to fewer employment opportunities and reduced assistance, refugees are starting to become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and long-term economic stagnation. The funding cuts have also devastated education services. Human Rights Watch reports that foreign aid reductions have led UNICEF (sponsored by USAID before the funding cut) to suspend thousands of learning centers. This decision affected an estimated 437,000 school-age children in the camps.⁴⁶ These learning centers had once provided free, structured education and protection for children, and their closure has left many with no access to schooling. Some community-run schools still exist in these camps, but due to funding cuts, they are now often charging fees that many families cannot afford and lack official recognition.⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch warns organizations that the lack of education opportunities in these camps are now creating a “lost generation” of Rohingya children. Because of limited educational opportunities, there has been an increased exposure to child labour, trafficking, and exploitation.⁴⁸ The last effects of the funding cuts have also taken a psychological toll. The loss of proper food, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities has severely undermined refugees’ sense of dignity and security. One notable example is the increased risk of “psychological stress among refugees, linked to loss of dignity” due to uncertainty and unmet needs, which continues to shape how they live their daily life in the camps.⁴⁹

Overall, the Rohingya refugees' livelihoods have been severely weakened by the cuts of humanitarian funding, which have now resulted in increased psychosocial distress, economic hardship, interrupted education, worsening hunger issues, and deteriorating health conditions. This is now a critical call to provide the necessary support for consistent and dependable international assistance to help the Rohingya communities.

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