

Oppression Among the Oppressed: Inside Refugee Camps in Cox's Bazar

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Policy Brief Series No. 105 (2020)

1. My Experience as a Reporter on the Rakhine Crises

As the Yangon Bureau Chief of *The Asahi Shimbun* since April 2017, I have covered the conflict in northern Rakhine involving the Rohingyas since 25 August 2017, having written more than 100 articles. I have visited northern Rakhine State in the western part of Myanmar numerous times, and the Cox's Bazar Rohingya refugee camps seven times. Each time I walked into the camps, I conducted 10 to 40 interviews with refugees, Bangladeshi government officials, and members of the local public.

Through more than 150 interviews, I have formed an impression of the complexity of the conflict involving the Rohingyas. I have tried to report on the conflict from various angles. Most of the articles are based on my interviews with the refugees, some convey the voices of local Bangladeshi people, and others the perspective of the Bangladeshi government. To report correct information, I have also conducted countless interviews on the Myanmar side: with government officials, politicians, and even Buddhist activists. I have taken great care to publish articles based on facts, not speculation. Sometimes, it was quite hard to listen to the stories of the refugees, but I repeated similar questions to make their stories more tangible. Some revealed their personal and sensitive experiences to me.

As long as I am in my current position, I plan to revisit the camps several times a year. I record all interviews and have stored my notes and information on the identity of my sources securely. In the following sections of this policy brief, I will present some of the less well-known problems in the refugee camps that my sources have revealed to me. All quotations are taken from my record of the interviews.

2. Threats by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army Against Hindu Refugees

Rumours of intimidation, violence and murder flowed from a sprawling, squalid camp for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims who have fled from neighbouring Myanmar. But finding Rohingya refugees who are willing to talk about these incidents proved daunting. They were living in fear of reprisals from the alleged perpetrators of the initial attacks in late August 2017 that triggered the civil war: the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army ('ARSA'), the self-proclaimed protector of the Rohingya refugees.

Myanmar's crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in 2017 creat-

ed an international humanitarian crisis. More than 700,000 refugees fled into Bangladesh.¹ In November 2017, Myanmar and Bangladesh announced that they would start repatriating refugees in stages along an "official route".² However, by the time of writing, no one has taken this official route. Instead, several hundred refugees returned through "unofficial routes".³ Many of the returning refugees told me that they believe Myanmar was still a dangerous place for them.

When I asked them why they decided to return to an unsafe country, they mentioned the attacks by ARSA fighters in the refugee camp. They also said that ARSA members had threatened anyone who wanted to return to Myanmar. Returning home, especially through the official route, would indicate an acceptance of Myanmar's measures, which could weaken ARSA's influence in its battle against the government. ARSA is an armed organization formed by Rohingya refugees. The group's attacks against Myanmar security forces in Rakhine State in August 2017 triggered the crackdown that led to the Rohingya exodus.⁴

Using Twitter and other media, ARSA has declared that it "defend[s] the world's persecuted people".⁵ Many Rohingyas support the group.⁶ To find out if ARSA was actually attacking the same people it had vowed to protect, I visited the refugee camp in suburban Cox's Bazar in south-eastern Bangladesh in mid-December 2019. The camp was crammed with temporary housing made of bamboo and sheets provided by the United Nations. Raw sewage flowed in spaces between the homes, emitting foul stench. The sunlight poking through gaps between the sheets was the refugees' only source of light.

The Rohingyas in the camp repeatedly said that "ARSA

¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ('UNHCR') reported over 742,000 refugees in July 2019. UNHCR, "Rohingya emergency", 31 July 2019 (available on its web site)

² "Myanmar signs pact with Bangladesh over Rohingya repatriation", *The Guardian*, 23 November 2017 (available on its web site).

³ These comments are based on my interviews on 23 August 2019 with refugees who returned to Myanmar.

⁴ International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase", in *Asia Report N° 292*, 7 December 2017 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/22qmxu>).

⁵ Twitter, tweet from the handle @ARSA_Official ('ARSA_The Army'), 25 August 2017.

⁶ "Rohingya crisis: Finding out the truth about Arsa militants", *BBC News*, 11 October 2017 (available on its web site).

have fought for us”.⁷ However, when asked about troubles in the camp, they lowered their heads and remained silent. Ninety per cent of the refugees in the camp are Rohingya Muslims.⁸ Some Hindus also fled to the camp from Rakhine amid the confusion of the Myanmar military crackdown.

The Hindus were the first persons willing to speak with me about ARSA-related problems in the camps. Source 1⁹ said he and 10 other Hindu refugees were summoned to a meeting with ARSA members at the temporary home of a group member about a year earlier. The Hindu refugees demanded that ARSA return money they had lent the group. The ARSA fighters then took the 11 Hindu refugees to separate locations and assaulted them. Only nine of them returned. “The other two are probably no longer alive”, Source 1 said.

Source 2¹⁰ said that around November 2018, when he was working outside the camp, men who called themselves ARSA members took him to a forest. They ordered him to read from a script in front of a video camera. When he refused, they beat him. So, he followed their orders, saying: “We Hindus are also angry about the measures taken by the Myanmar government”. A few days later, the video spread through Facebook. “They probably wanted to show that not only Rohingya but also Hindu refugees are angry about the Myanmar government”, Source 2 said.

Source 3,¹¹ who has tried to pull Hindu refugees together in the camp, said ARSA members threatened him after he expressed a desire to return to Myanmar at a meeting of camp refugee representatives. “You should not step out of line with us”, he quoted ARSA members as telling him. “We won’t allow you to selfishly return.” Source 3 also said they told him not to attend any more meetings at the camp. “Everybody is scared of being assaulted”, he said.

3. Victimization of Rohingyas in the Camps

Source 4,¹² a Bangladeshi reporter who helped me in my work, said Hindus are not the only targets of ARSA. “ARSA has been involved in various crimes”, he said: “Many of the victims are Rohingyas”.

I was able to contact a Rohingya refugee – Source 5¹³ – who said her husband was killed by ARSA. She was worried about speaking with a foreign reporter, so I let a Bangladeshi interpreter talk to her first. Source 5 then granted me the interview. “My husband was repeatedly asked by ARSA to join the group, but he refused”, Source 5 said. In July 2018, her husband, 35, was stabbed in the chest and other body parts; he died on a street outside the camp, Source 5 claimed.

Source 5 said the crime was committed in public, and three suspects were immediately arrested. However, she said she was never informed of the motive behind the attack or whether the assailants were connected to ARSA. Source 5, citing a warning

⁷ The words are based on the interviews in three Cox’s Bazar Rohingya refugee camps on 15-17 December 2019.

⁸ Based on 10 interviews with Hindus in the Rohingya refugee camps, it is estimated that the ratio of the Hindu population is less than 10%.

⁹ 62-year-old male Hindu refugee, interviewed on 15 December 2019.

¹⁰ 41-year-old male Hindu refugee, interviewed on 15 December 2019.

¹¹ 40-year-old male Hindu village chief, interviewed on 15 December 2019.

¹² 28-year-old male local journalist, interviewed on 16 December 2019.

¹³ 30-year-old Rohingya Muslim female, interviewed on 17 December 2019.

for her husband to be careful a few days before the fatal assault, said she had no doubt who was responsible for his death. “It was definitely ARSA”, she said. However, she added: “To be honest, I didn’t want to talk about it now that Myanmar has been sued at the International Court of Justice”.¹⁴ She said she was worried that telling her story could influence the Court’s ruling if people around the world knew there are bad people among the Rohingya Muslims. When I tried to ask her in-depth questions, her relatives stopped her from speaking further by saying: “Don’t say anything else”.

According to Source 4, the Bangladeshi reporter, more than 40 people were killed in the camp in 2019. Although ARSA is believed to be behind many of the incidents, refugees will not discuss the details, even to local reporters.

When I thought I had to wrap up my interviews, I made contact with a 25-year-old Rohingya man (Source 6) who agreed to be interviewed by phone. Source 6 said seven or eight masked men took him to an unknown location in October 2019. “We heard that you want to return to Myanmar”, they said, before punching him twice in the face. He said he had told his family and friends that he wanted to return, and the information must have somehow found its way to ARSA. He said they issued a further threat: “If you say you want to return, we will keep observing you forever. No one can protect you if you step out from the camp”. The man said he no longer uses the word “return”.

He introduced me to a 67-year-old Rohingya refugee who told me about his encounter with ARSA fighters. A few months ago, he said, about 20 ARSA members arrived at his temporary home in the camp, but he was not there at the time. “I had consulted with the United Nations because I knew that ARSA members have sold relief supplies given by the UN”, he said. He believed that the ARSA members who visited his home planned to punish him. He has since moved around among the temporary homes of acquaintances to avoid the fighters.

“Many people have noticed that ARSA members are doing strange things, but no one can say anything because we fear them”, Source 6 said. “If we opposed them, we would be ignored by our friends who have believed that ARSA is the group that is protecting Rohingyas.”

Source 7¹⁵ explained the reasons for ARSA’s aggressive tactics in the camp: “A group of several hundred people in the camp identify themselves as ARSA. With prolonged living in the camp, young people who have lost hope for the future are inclined to join the group. There are no specific leaders, and they keep changing their alignments”.¹⁶ ARSA is also involved in illegal drugs and prostitution, and its activities have been expanding for a year, the non-governmental organization (‘NGO’) worker said. “At night, the camp becomes almost lawless after Bangladeshi police and NGO members leave. ARSA is apparently working under such conditions.”

According to Source 8,¹⁷ more than a dozen Rohingya fam-

¹⁴ International Court of Justice, *The Gambia v. Myanmar*, Application Instituting Proceedings and Request for Provisional Measures, 11 November 2019 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/69p376>); “INSIGHT: Suu Kyi’s defence overshadowed by heavy criticism against her”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 20 December 2019 (available on its web site).

¹⁵ Bangladeshi local staff of Médecins Sans Frontières.

¹⁶ These words are based on the interview with Source 7 on 17 December 2019.

¹⁷ Bangladeshi local staff of British charity group Christian Aid.

ilies confirmed that they wanted to return to Myanmar 48 hours before their scheduled departure from Bangladesh in November 2018.¹⁸ However, on the day of the return, no one showed any desire to leave Bangladesh. Some refugees mentioned “pressure from ARSA”. “By delaying the return, ARSA might be trying to maintain its power of being a symbol of the Rohingya”, a member of an NGO said.

About 60 per cent of the refugees – approximately 400,000 persons – are children. The prolonged stay in the refugee camps makes their education a major issue. A learning centre, operated in one of the camps by the United Nations and NGOs, teaches around 40 children how to count in English. They sit on the dirt floor because there are no desks or chairs. Two hours are set aside each day for lessons. The teacher is a Rohingya woman who a year earlier was a student at the same learning centre. The class is made up of children as young as 5 or 6 years of age, along with a 15-year-old boy. There are no classes for children over the age of 15, meaning that around 25,000 children in the camps receive no education at all.¹⁹ Source 9²⁰ said: “I want to study, but there is no classroom or educational materials. I spend many days doing nothing”.

The lack of educational support is partially due to Bangladeshi government policy. One source said the government does not want to implement any programmes that could encourage the refugees to remain in Bangladesh. For that reason, the government has banned the teaching of the Bengali language to the Rohingya refugees. Instructions have been handed down that only the Myanmar and English languages are tolerated. The Rohingya dialect is close to the Bengali spoken in Chittagong District where the camps are.

4. Obstacles to Repatriation

A primary reason for the delay in repatriation is the lack of preparations by the nations involved. The Myanmar government asserts that preparations to accept the refugees have been completed. However, the government has refused to agree to the UNHCR’s suggestion that refugees be allowed to return temporarily to see for themselves where they would end up living.²¹ One concern held by the government is that the strong resistance shown by radical Buddhists in Rakhine State, where the Rohingyas are scheduled to return, will lead to trouble among those temporarily returning and make a permanent repatriation all but impossible. Indeed, radical Buddhist Arakanese are currently fighting a civil war against Myanmar’s Defence Services, through the Arakan Army.

Refugees say they have no intention of returning if they have no idea whether it will be safe for them to do so. In addition, while the Bangladeshi government clearly wants to promote repatriation, it has dragged its feet in preparing for such a move. According to my diplomatic sources, the Bangladeshi government decided on a 22 August 2019 start-date for repatriation

without consulting the Myanmar government. The two governments only started preparing for the repatriation from about 19 August 2019.²² Refugees who were told immediately before the start that they were subject to repatriation said they needed more time to prepare mentally for the return. Mr. Ambia Perveen, a member of the European Rohingya Council, said: “Repatriation is being pushed at the convenience of the governments, and the feelings of the refugees are being ignored”.²³

Some Rohingya refugees have already returned to Myanmar by sidestepping the formal procedures established by the two governments. A reporter of *The Asahi Shimbun* accompanied Mr. MARUYAMA Ichiro, Japanese Ambassador to Myanmar, when he visited some of those refugees to ask them about their experiences. Many of the refugees said Rohingya militants had exerted pressure on the refugees not to return to Myanmar.

Myanmar requested the Japanese government to carry out the interviews to gain an insight into the mindset of returning refugees.²⁴ According to the Myanmar government, about 250 refugees returned out of their own accord by the end of August 2019.²⁵ Source 10²⁶ said a member of ARSA, who attacked a police unit in Rakhine State in August 2017, threatened him while in the refugee camp that: “I will kill you if you return home”. ARSA members who live in refugee camps are believed to be in close contact with members back in Myanmar. Source 10 said he wanted to return to Myanmar because there were no jobs or money in the refugee camp. Last year, he and five family members crossed the border by foot with little in the way of belongings. They now live with a relative in northern Rakhine State. “ARSA is trying to prolong the refugee issue in order to continue to be the focus of global attention, so it can maintain its voice in various matters”, the man said. “My elderly parents still live in the camp, so I feel they are like hostages.”²⁷

Source 11²⁸ returned to Rakhine in October 2018 with two other family members. He said he was happy to be home even though he does not yet have a job and worries about putting food on the table for his family. “There are many in the refugee camp who want to return home, but are afraid of saying anything because they feel ARSA is watching”, the man said.

5. Problems of Drugs and Prostitution

Among the approximately 700,000 Rohingya refugees are some who have made desperate choices to survive. Source 12,²⁹ barely visible in the darkness of a shelter, said in a hoarse voice: “I have no hope. Now, I feel as though I am only waiting to die”. Source 12 and six family members fled to the refugee camp in September 2017, after their village was burned to the ground. Source 11 said he was quickly approached by another Rohingya man at the camp who said: “How about trying drugs?”. Source 12, a

¹⁸ Based on the interview with Source 8.

¹⁹ UNICEF Bangladesh, *Beyond Survival: Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh Want to Learn*, UNICEF Advocacy Alert, August 2019 (available on its web site).

²⁰ 17-year-old male child, interviewed on 20 July 2019.

²¹ The UNHCR suggested a ‘go and see’ approach before the repatriation. UNHCR, “Statement by UN High Commissioner for Refugees on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar”, 11 November 2018 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/v9ztsu>). However, the Myanmar government has not reacted to it.

²² Based on sources from the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments.

²³ Based on the interview with Mr. NARABE Takeshi, a staff writer of *The Asahi Shimbun* in June 2018.

²⁴ Based on the interviews with two Myanmar government officials and the Japanese Ambassador by the present writer.

²⁵ According to the Deputy Minister of Myanmar’s Ministry of Social Welfare, interviewed by the present writer on 23 August 2019.

²⁶ 40-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed on 27 August 2019 in Rakhine State.

²⁷ All quotations are from the interview with Source 10.

²⁸ 43-year-old Rohingya man, who returned to Myanmar, interviewed on 27 August 2019.

²⁹ 50-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed on 24 August 2019.

fisherman by trade, had no problems making ends meet when he lived in Myanmar. However, in the refugee camp the family only received rice and bean rations. He wanted to buy candy for his children as a treat but could not do so without money, so he took up the man's offer of drugs. He went to a shelter in the camp as instructed and received a bag containing a kilogram of powdered marijuana in a room so dark that he could not make out the face of the seller. A deal was made, and 7,000 Bangladeshi taka (USD 82) changed hands.

Source 12 paid out all the cash he had brought from Myanmar as payment. He followed instructions and divided the contents of the bag into 400 small paper packets. He was introduced to 'clients' who paid 50 taka for each packet. Buyers showed up on a daily basis, and he sold his entire stash in a week. He was left with 20,000 taka. He returned home after buying candy at a shop outside the camp and was met by his smiling children. The man kept up the business, telling himself it would only be for a short time more. Then, he began smoking his product. He felt he was living better than his neighbours because he was able to buy meat and fish. However, he also heard a rumour that the police had fatally shot two drug dealers over the past year. He has little hope of being able to return to his former existence even if he is repatriated. "I want my children to lead a better life, but I have become fatigued over my own", he said.

Source 13³⁰ sold not just marijuana but a stimulant known locally as 'yaba'. While the marijuana sells for 40 taka a packet, one yaba pill goes for 400 taka. Even if he has to pay part of his proceeds to his boss in the camp, he still ends up making 3,000 taka a day. Forty per cent of his customers are refugees living in the camp, and the rest are local Bangladeshis. The man lost his parents to illness when he lived in Myanmar. "I have to look after my three younger sisters", he said. "I have to save money for their marriages." He said the real reason he did not want to stop selling drugs was that he wanted to feel alive. "It is very trying living every day with nothing to do", he said. "Even if it is illegal, earning a living itself is an important thing." When his grandfather, who lives with him in the shelter, learned of his drug dealings, he beat him mercilessly with a stick and admonished him: "Don't live in a manner that is shameful as a human". The man said: "I now feel like I want to stop. I do not want to continue while making my grandfather unhappy".³⁷

Source 14³¹ arrived at the refugee camp in September 2017 with her nine-year-old daughter and two-year-old son, and she was at her wits' end because she did not know how to go about obtaining food rations distributed by international organizations. Her husband left the shelter and never returned, saying: "I cannot stand this kind of life". That was when an elderly woman living nearby raised the prospect of prostitution. "You need food

for your children, don't you? Come to this location tomorrow night", the old woman told her, providing a nearby shelter as the meeting point. When the young refugee went to the shelter, a stranger turned up who did not give his name and paid her 300 taka to have sex. After that, she went to the same shelter two or three times a week. Her son slept in the same shelter because he would not stop crying if she was away from him.

The woman obtained food from an international organization about four to five months after arriving at the camp. She was finally able to stop selling her body for money at the start of 2019, having put aside some funds. Nevertheless, she still weeps when she recalls that experience. "My regret over what I did will never disappear", she said. "I become very sad when I think that I will be a soiled human until the day I die."³²

6. Conclusion

The fact that more than 700,000 refugees fled from their homes in northern Rakhine in late 2017 is most definitely tragic. As a journalist, my role in the early stages was to convey the refugees' real voices to the world. Through numerous visits and interviews with refugees and local people in northern Rakhine and Cox's Bazar, I found that the problem in the camps – and the Rohingya issue itself – is much more complicated than I had initially thought. Many actors in the international community have harshly criticized Myanmar over this issue. I mostly agree that Myanmar has failed to handle this problem appropriately, which has tragically led to the flight of hundreds of thousands.

On the other hand, the starting point of the crisis that commenced on 25 August 2017 was an insurgency led by ARSA in northern Rakhine State. Dozens of interviews made me realize that the group still exists in Myanmar and in Bangladesh, and that it has a certain amount of power, which often threatens other Rohingya. My duty as a journalist is not to blame this militant group, but to unearth the reality in the camps in Bangladesh and in Rakhine State. Through visits to the camps and Rakhine, I will continue to dig into the actual features of the Rohingya issue in the future.

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ISBN: 978-82-8348-090-0.

TOAEP-PURL: <http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/105-sometaya/>.

LTD-PURL: <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/wqj2p3/>.

³⁰ 40-year-old Rohingya man interviewed in the refugee camp of Cox's Bazar on 24 August 2019.

³¹ 23-year-old Rohingya female, interviewed on 24 August 2019.

³² All the quotes are based on the interview with Source 14 on 24 August 2019.