

# **Implications of the Rohingya Relocation from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char, Bangladesh**

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## **Abstract**

This *IMR* Dispatch attempts to elucidate the different concerns of human right groups and international communities over the relocation of the Rohingyas, a forcibly displaced ethnic minority of Myanmar, from the Cox's Bazar refugee camps, in mainland Bangladesh, to a newly developed island, Bhasan Char, in the Bay of Bengal. Of the nearly 1 million Rohingyas currently living in Cox's Bazar camps, the Bangladesh government has started relocating 100,000 Rohingyas to Bhasan Char. International organizations have expressed three concerns over this relocation strategy: first, that the Rohingyas have been relocated to Bhasan Char forcibly, second, that since Bhasan Char is a newly built island, there are potential environmental risks for the Rohingyas, and third, that this relocation does not ensure that the Rohingyas' human rights will be respected on the island. The Bangladesh government, however, has dismissed these allegations, arguing that the relocation of 100,000 Rohingyas is voluntary and that the island provides them an opportunity for improved living. This *IMR* Dispatch reflects on those allegations concerning the relocation strategy, with the goal of drawing migration scholars' attention to these developments. Since the Rohingyas are already a forcibly displaced community, migration scholars should pay close attention to this re-migration or onward

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migration of large numbers of Rohingyas to a new island and its implications for host-country approaches to forced migration.

### **Keywords**

Rohingya, relocation, forced migration, environment, Bhasan Char

## **Introduction**

Bangladesh currently hosts the world's largest refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, where nearly 1 million Rohingyas who were forcibly displaced from Myanmar have sought refuge since August 2017 (Babu 2020; Khatun 2017; UNHCR 2021). Despite hosting such a big community, over the last three years, the Bangladeshi government has been criticized by some human-rights organizations for its plan to relocate of 100,000 Rohingyas, currently living in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, to Bhasan Char, a newly developed island in the Bay of Bengal (Hossain 2020a, 2020b). Such groups have accused the Bangladesh government of sending Rohingyas to Bhasan Char without their consent (HRW 2020). As a result, the Rohingya relocation to Bhasan Char has gained enormous attention in the international news media (Hossain 2020a, 2020b; Guardian 2020).

The Rohingyas are an ethnic minority from Myanmar who were compelled to seek shelter in neighboring Bangladesh after a deadly military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine state in August 2017 (Gorlick 2019). The military operation of 25 August 2017 began after alleged Rohingya extremists associated with Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya rebel group in Rakhine, attacked police stations in Mungdow (Head 2017). To retaliate, the Myanmar military persecuted a few thousand Rohingyas, burning their villages and looting their belongings (Head 2017, Islam 2021). This military crackdown has been described as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing by the UN-assigned Anan Commission (The Guardian 2017).

Since the early 1960s, when the Myanmar military captured state power (Ibrahim 2018), the Rohingya have faced systematic persecution, including the loss of citizenship rights in 1982, human-rights violations, and being labelled as foreigners, from mainstream Myanmar rulers (Babu 2020; Ibrahim 2018; Gorlick 2019). In the last four decades, the Rohingyas have repeatedly fled into Bangladesh in response to systematic persecution from the Myanmar government, but with the exception of a few thousand migrants, all Rohingyas were eventually repatriated (Ullah et al. 2021). That pattern changed after the 2017 Rohingya influx into Bangladesh, when the Myanmar government became reluctant to repatriate displaced Rohingyas and ensure a safe living in Myanmar, resulting a life of uncertainty for the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar (Sadik 2020). Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar are densely populated, with an average family size of six to eight persons living in a 10-square-foot cottage.

This population density creates risk of landslide and increases the threat of fires in the camps (BBC 2021), where the Rohingyas struggle with accommodations, living space, sanitation, shortage of drinking water, education, and health issues (reliefweb 2021, Alamgir and Islam 2017; Akhter et al. 2020). In the face of these circumstances, the Bangladeshi government plans to relocate 100,000 Rohingyas to a newly developed island in the Bay of Bengal, popularly called Bhasan Char (Abrar 2020; Guardian 2020; Paul, Baldwin, and Marshall 2018). As of October 2021, more than 19,000 Rohingyas had been relocated to Bhasan Char (Aljazeera 2021b).

The Bangladesh government has provided few justifications for this relocation plan. In addition to hosting large refugee camps, Cox's Bazar is also Bangladesh's most prominent tourist spot, with the world's longest sea beach and rich biodiversity (New Age 2019), both of which face environmental risks from the presence of 1 million people in relatively small camps (Hossain 2020a, 2020b). Since Cox's Bazar camps are overcrowded, the Bangladeshi government thought to relocate 100,000 Rohingyas to the adjacent island (HRW 2021). Bhasan Char, nearly two hours from the Bangladeshi mainland, was developed by the Bangladesh Navy and, according to the Bangladesh government, provides better opportunities for the Rohingyas (BBC 2020a, 2020b). Despite the government's repeated claims that the Rohingya would be safe and secure on Bhasan Char, rights groups, including Human Rights Watch (Abrar 2020; Beech 2020), have expressed concerns about three major issues: (1) the island's distance from Cox's Bazar and vulnerability to cyclones, (2) the possibility that the Rohingyas might face prison-like conditions on the island, and (3) the chance that due to their forceful relocation to the island, the Rohingya might also face human-rights violations (The Guardian 2020; Hossain 2020a, 2020b; DW 2020). This *IMR* Dispatch sheds light on the different arguments put forward by international groups concerning the Rohingya relocation and examines how the Bangladesh government is responding to those allegations. Despite some academic research on the Rohingya crisis (Ahmed 2010; Moshin 2020, Hossain 2020a; Ibrahim 2018; Siddiquee 2020; Uddin 2020), little scholarly work has explored debates around the current strategy to relocate the Rohingyas to Bhasan Char. Thus, this Dispatch can further understandings of how 100,000 Rohingyas will be relocated and why the relocation plan has faced criticism from different international organizations.

## **Bhasan Char and Rohingya Relocation**

The story of Bhasan Char is relatively new. With an area of 36 square kilometers, it is a newly formed island in the Bay of Bengal whose presence can be traced back to nearly three decades ago (Hossain 2020a, 2020b). When this island was formed, the local Bangladeshis used to identify it as Bhansan Char, which means 'floating island.' Initially submerged in high tide, the island, over time, built up with silt, although some low areas continued to be submerged before the government

started developing the island in 2015. Two hours by boat from mainland Bangladesh (Bhuiyan 2021), the low-lying island, according to media reports (*The Guardian* 2020), is vulnerable to cyclones and floods, due to heavy ocean waves.

Before the 2017 influx, camps in Cox's Bazar were home to nearly 30,000 Rohingyas (Ullah et al. 2021), all of whom had come to Bangladesh to escape persecution from Myanmar elites (Ahmed 2010). In 2015, the Bangladesh government initiated a plan to relocate these people to Bhasan Char, after a thorough development of the island by the Bangladesh Navy (Hossain 2020a, 2020b), which was charged with making the island suitable for human inhabitants (*The Daily Star* 2021a, 2021b; Al-Masum Molla 2021). This development project was accelerated in 2018, when the Bangladesh government decided to relocate 100,00 Rohingyas to Bhasan Char (*ibid.*). The island's development included erecting high perimeter sea walls, providing electrification, constructing 120 cyclone centers, mosques, community clinics, a police station, and 1,400 cluster housing facilities, building local markets, managing drinking water, ensuring sanitation, building a lighthouse, helipad, power plants, and road and drainage networks, planting trees, and building roads on the island, with an estimated cost of more than USD 350 million (Bhattacharyya 2020).

International organizations, including Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, have raised three concerns over the Bangladesh government's plan to relocate the Rohingyas to Bhasan Char. The first concern involves the Rohingyas' forced relocation, the second addresses the island's vulnerability, and the third includes fears of human-rights violations (Aljazeera 2020; *Guardian* 2020; HRW 2020; Paul, Baldwin and Marshall 2018; Reuters 2021). First, Human Rights Watch and other human-rights organizations have alleged that the Bangladesh government is forcing the Rohingyas to move to Bhasan Char (HRW 2020). Despite the government's assurance of non-coerced relocation, a few Rohingyas have found their names on the list without their consent (*The Guardian* 2020). International organizations interviewed some of the first Rohingya moved to the island, reporting that none were happy to be relocated (HRW 2020; Hossain 2020a, 2020b). Philip Grandy (2020), the UN High Commissioner for refugees (UN News 2020), also expressed concern over not hearing the Rohingyas' voice in the relocation process. As Saad Hammadi, Amnesty International's South Asia campaigner, said:

"It is crucial that the Bangladeshi authorities let the UN, rights groups and humanitarian agencies carry out independent assessments of Bhashan Char's habitability first before taking any steps to relocate people there. No relocation plan, either to Bhashan Char or to another location, can be undertaken without the full and informed consent of the individuals involved" (*The Guardian* 2020).

Second, a major concern has been raised over the island's environmental vulnerability (Abrar 2020). Human Rights Watch argued that this new island is composed of accumulated silt and not ready for inhabitants (HRW 2019). During high tide and cyclones, there is a significant chance of the island's submersion; therefore, the question of its ecological stability is most pressing (DW 2020; Paul, Baldwin and

Marshall 2018; Bhattacharyya 2020; *The Guardian* 2020). In addition, Bhasan Char is far from the Bangladesh mainland, making it hard to reach in case of emergencies.

Third, and finally, human-rights issues have been raised by international organizations such as HRW (2020), which have questioned whether the Rohingyas will be allowed to move freely on the island, how young Rohingyas will be provided education, how health, sanitation, and safety will be ensured, and how relocated Rohingyas will be protected during natural disasters (HRW 2020). Bran Adams, a director of HRW, predicted that the island will be like a prison because commuting to and from it is difficult and because there is no guarantee that the Rohingya will be entitled to move freely (HRW 2019). Additional concerns have been expressed over how young Rohingyas will be provided education facilities, which was easily accessible in the Cox's Bazar camps, and how primary and secondary health facilities will be provided to the Rohingyas by different groups (Wiseman 2021).

## The Bangladeshi Government Response

The Bangladesh government has offered few justifications for the relocation plan. The first argument put forward by government officials was that Cox's Bazar is overcrowded (Abrar 2020), creating problems like small accommodations, improper health and sanitation, and landslide and flash flood risk in monsoon season (*The Daily Star* 2021a, 2021b; Al-Masum Molla 2021). Relocating 100,000 people, they argue, will ease pressure on Cox's Bazar. Second, the Bangladesh government points to environmental degradation associated with the Cox's Bazar camps (Bhuiyan 2021). The hilly southern part of this district had to be deforested to accommodate nearly 1 million Rohingyas (Hossain 2020a, 2020b), and this large-scale cutting of trees has put Cox's Bazar biodiversity at risk and created potential environmental hazards (Khatun 2017). During the monsoon season, for example, there is risk of regular landslides in the camps (Khatun 2017). Finally, the Bangladeshi government points to security concerns in the camps (Babu 2020). Managing a large population in a small area complicates intra-Rohingya conflicts. To overcome these issues in crowded camps, the government planned to shift 100,000 Rohingyas to the new island (Abrar 2020; Hossain 2020a, 2020b; Ahmed and Ahmed 2020; Islam 2020).

The Bangladesh government has dismissed claims that the island is not safe for human inhabitancy (Guardian 2020), arguing that they have built a strong infrastructure involving a famous British company, HR Wallington (Bhuiyan 2021). Following HR Wallington's design advice, the Bangladesh navy built 12.1 km-high embankments, which can ensure the island's safety during high tidal waves and cyclone season (Abrar 2020; Bhuiyan 2021). Thus, the Bangladesh government dismisses concerns over the island's vulnerability.

In terms of accusations of forced migrations to the island (*The Guardian* 2020), the Bangladesh government claims that the Rohingya relocation from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char is voluntary (Hossain 2020a, 2020b). The Bangladesh foreign minister

has assured international organizations, including the UN, and human-rights groups that since this relocation is meant to improve Rohingyas' lives with better-equipped household on the island, there was no question of forced relocation (Hossain 2020a, 2020b). As he claimed, "Bangladesh government has nothing to hide. Rohingyas would be in Bhasan Char despite negative campaigns by some interest groups. Those Rohingyas that have moved to [the island] are very pleased to be there" (Ahmed and Ahmed 2021). A Bangladesh deputy in charge of the Rohingya camps echoed the minister and said, "They are going there happily. No-one is forced. The government has taken all measures to deal with disasters, including their comfortable living and livelihood" (Hossain 2020a, 2020b; Guardian 2020).

The Guardian (2020) interviewed a 40-year-old Majhi (Majhis are group leaders of the Rohingyas who also work as their spokespeople) from the Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar, who expressed his satisfaction over Bhasan Char, including its housing and other facilities. He was also assured by the Bangladesh government that there would be sufficient aid for relocated Rohingyas. Many other Rohingyas have echoed the belief that there will be a few thousand Bangladeshi people working for them (Guardian 2020) and that, therefore, natural calamities will not be a sole concern (Ahmed and Ahmed 2020). This voluntary migration, the government argues, has been arranged to reduce pressure on the Cox's Bazar camps and to provide 100,000 Rohingyas a much-improved life (Abrar 2020).

## Rohingya Responses to Bhasan Char

Rights groups have raised concerns about whether the Bangladesh government will ensure the Rohingyas' human rights, including safe living and freedom of movement (HRW 2019, Abrar 2020). Since the relocation process started in December 2020 (Molla 2020), actual data and information can be obtained only once the relocation is complete and those relocated Rohingyas start living on the new island. Some relocated Rohingyas, however, have reported mixed feelings after living there for a while. Deutsche Welle, a leading German News agency (2021), for example, identified problems expressed by relocated Rohingyas they interviewed. A few Rohingyas claimed that they were told by unnamed Bangladeshi personnel that they would be provided with a monthly stipend if they live on the island, but officials from the Bangladesh government said that no such promise had been made and that a monetary stipend was not a part of the process (DW 2021). DW (2021) also found a lack of improved medical facilities on the island, where one relocated Rohingya reported that a Rohingya women died due to the lack of emergency medical services.

In contrast to the problems identified by some Rohingyas relocated to Bhasan Char, a research team from the University of Dhaka (Islam 2020a, 2020b), *The Daily Star* (2021), *Dhaka Tribune* (2021) and *Asia News* (2021) interviewed relocated Rohingyas who expressed satisfaction over living on the new island and found no evidence of human-rights violations. Three reasons are mentioned in these reports for the Rohingyas' satisfaction (Bhuiyan 2021, Asia News 2021).

First, on the island, the Rohingyas have better accommodation facilities than in Cox's Bazar. Second, the island is less crowded than the camps of Cox's Bazar. Third, security is better on the island, where refugees feel safer than in Cox's Bazar. As one interviewee said, "This is a healthy place for us because of greater security and it is less overcrowded" (Asia News 2021). While speaking to *The Daily Star* (2021), a relocated Rohingya said:

It seems there will be no more struggle and sufferings here. At the camp, all of our family members used to live in a small hut with a tarpaulin over our head. We would get drenched on rainy days and had to endure unbearable heat in summer. We couldn't bathe properly... But here [in Bhasan Char], we have a building to live in with other facilities that I believe will give us comfort and peace... That's why I decided to come here.

On April 3, 2021, a delegate of foreign diplomats from the European Union and 10 countries, including the United States, the UK, France, and Germany, visited the island and interviewed some Rohingyas living there (*The Daily Star* 2021a, 2021b; Al-Masum Molla 2021). The delegates found that the relocated Rohingyas were happy, with more secure living facilities on the island than they had in Cox's Bazar (*The Daily Star* 2021a, 2021b; Al-Masum Molla 2021). Though the UN was not directly involved in the relocation process, they hope to work with the Bangladesh government in this process. A UNHCR committee, for instance, visited Bhasan Char in March 2021 for the first time and provided a positive report to the UN, claiming that the island has improved living conditions for the Rohingyas. One UNHCR official shared, "Based on the preliminary findings of the first UN visit to Bhasan Char in late March, the UN clearly recognizes the prevailing humanitarian and protection needs of the Rohingya refugees already relocated to Bhasan Char" (Bhuiyan 2021).

Following positive feedback from the first UNHCR report, a high-profile team from the UNHCR, including UNHCR Assistant High Commissioners for Protection and for Operations, Gillian Triggs and Raouf Mazou, visited the island from May 30 to June 2, 2021, and found significant improvements of the Rohingyas' living conditions. The UNHCR, in its official statement, summarized this visit, saying, "it was clear that the 18,000 Rohingya refugees currently on the island have protection and assistance needs. That is, access to meaningful livelihoods opportunities, skills development, education, health and access to cash to facilitate their daily lives" (UNCHR 2021). Nonetheless, the UNHCR also urged Bangladesh to maintain the process completely on a voluntary basis (UNHCR 2021).

## Conclusion

This *IMR* Dispatch has presented why the international media and human-rights organizations have expressed concerns over the Rohingya relocation and how the Bangladesh government has responded to those allegations and justified the relocation process. Bangladesh has strongly denied the charges against them, especially the

allegations of forced relocation, of Bhasan Char's environmental vulnerability, and of human-rights violations. Based on the available information provided by government spokespeople and Bangladeshi media, it is possible that this relocation will open new opportunities and a better life for the Rohingyas. The present living standard in the Cox's Bazar camps offers little hope for the Rohingyas. Thus, relocating 100,000 of them could ensure a better standard of living. Due to the limited inclusion of key stakeholders in the relocation process, however, concerns have been raised by many groups, and international media have portrayed this relocation strategy as a coerced migration of the Rohingyas to Bhasan Char. We suggest that given these circumstances, this relocation process may receive support from international organizations and right groups if the Bangladesh government takes two measures. First, it must investigate the allegations of non-voluntary relocation and other human rights issues. Second, international observers, led by the United Nations, should be allowed to make a comprehensive assessment of living conditions on Bhasan Char in comparison to Cox's Bazar camps. If the UN is involved in this entire process, confusion over how the current relocation will affect the Rohingyas can be reduced and the process can be more accountable. This *IMR* Dispatch offers an initial assessment of this relocation process and calls for further attention to this development, as well as to similar attempts to use relocate displaced populations elsewhere in the world.


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