

Rohingya refugees face catastrophe in Bangladesh

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With the monsoon season about to start in Bangladesh, the plight of Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazar district in the country's south, is about to drastically worsen.

Around 900,000 refugees, including those who have fled Myanmar since last August to escape attacks by Burmese military and Buddhist supremacists, are living in flimsy bamboo shelters spread across steep hillsides and in flood-prone valleys and islands.

Rohingya in Myanmar's northwestern Rakhine state are an oppressed Muslim minority. They were stripped of their citizenship rights in 1982 and have faced numerous anti-democratic restrictions and periodic violence. Around 200,000 Rohingya were already living in Bangladesh before the recent wave of refugees.

Many refugees are living without adequate clean water, sanitary facilities, health care and food. According to a *Daily Star* report, the UN refugee agency, UNHRC, estimates that up to 200,000 Rohingya are at risk from landslides, floods and outbreak of epidemics this monsoon season.

The UN has admitted that it is "very unlikely" that bamboo community shelters would survive cyclones and the World Health Organisation warned there could be "massive loss of lives" when the monsoons hit.

Despite widespread sympathy among ordinary Bangladeshis for the Rohingya, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasani's Awami League government initially tried to block the most recent refugees from entering Bangladesh and is attempting to push them back into Myanmar.

As for the major global powers, they describe the Rohingya as "the world's most persecuted minority" and feign "concern." This is entirely hypocritical.

While UNHRC and its partners launched a \$US950

million Joint Response Plan this year to provide minimum facilities, only 16 percent of the required funds have been received. A World Health Organisation (WHO) situation report on May 24 said it needed \$113.1 million, but had only received 6.3 percent of this amount.

The UK's department for international development has boasted that it was one of the "biggest" providers of humanitarian aid to Rohingya in Bangladesh, but it has only donated \$172 million. The US claims to have given Bangladesh \$163 million in refugee aid since last August.

These amounts from are a drop on the ocean and a tiny fraction of the annual military expenditures of these imperialist countries.

US President Donald Trump has written to Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina declaring that his government will "continue to pressure" Myanmar in order to create the necessary conditions for a return of Rohingya.

Trump's statement, however, has nothing to do with sympathy for the plight of refugees. Washington wants to maintain close relations with Bangladesh whilst at the same time keeping political pressure on Myanmar so that it adheres to the US's geo-political agenda in the Asia-Pacific. Both Myanmar and Bangladesh are strategically important for Washington and its increasingly aggressive efforts to undermine Chinese influence in the region.

For months, Washington and its allies ignored or downplayed the Burmese military's brutal operations in the Rakhine state against the Rohingya minority, which began last August.

The Trump administration is currently exploiting the banner of "human rights" to put pressure on the Burmese military and the National League for

Democracy (NLD) government of Aung San Suu Kyi to distance itself from Beijing.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh authorities have no serious plans to evacuate refugees to safe places. In fact, the Bangladesh government announced plans earlier this year to send 100,000 refugees to Bhasan Char, a muddy, uninhabited island. The low-lying island is prone to flooding and other dangers, including pirates and human traffickers.

Sinohydro, a Chinese construction company, has been engaged to build a \$US280 million, 13-kilometre flood-defence embankment but this will do little to prevent the disasters created by the monsoons.

Aid agencies in Bangladesh have warned of a disastrous situation. Early this month Francesco Segoni, emergency coordinator for Doctors without Border (MSF), said: “Where relocation is already happening, sanitation and hygiene conditions are below the minimum standards. When the rain comes, not only do we anticipate flooding and landslides... [but] an “exponential increase in the risk of a [disease] outbreak. Latrines will go underwater; contamination seems inevitable. We are bracing for the worst.”

Referring to the lack of safe water, Segoni said: “The provision of clean drinking water is an absolute priority in the camps. It’s as much a lifesaving activity as our medical work. We are racing against time to reach out to new areas and keep up with the ever-evolving context.”

Deputy South Asia Director for Amnesty International Omar Waraich has raised doubts about the Bhasan Char island plan. “No one in the humanitarian community who we spoke to thought this was a good idea. This is a silt island that only emerged into view [above the sea] recently,” he told the media. People have been killed and homes destroyed by monsoons in the nearby Sandwip Island.

One refugee, Jahid Hussain, told the press that he would not relocate to Bhasan Char, which means floating island, but “would rather die right here.”

H. T. Imam, a political adviser to Prime Minister Hasina, told Reuters that sending Rohingya to Bhasan Char was a “temporary measure.” The refugees would not be given Bangladeshi passports or ID cards and would be allowed to leave only if they were returning to Burma or a third country.

Between 40 and 50 armed officers will be stationed

on the island, Imam said, while cynically declaring “it’s not a concentration camp.”



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