Bangladesh warns UN officials over Rohingya refugees

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Bangladeshi Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen has warned United Nations officials that they must support Dhaka's harsh treatment of Rohingya refugees or leave the country. Momen made the remarks in an interview early this month with Deutsche Welle, Germany's public broadcaster.

The Awami League-led government wants to relocate Rohingya refugees, who fled Burma (Myanmar) in the past two years, to the cyclone-prone, silt island of Bhasan Char. UN officials in Dhaka disagree with Dhaka's plans, citing the low-lying island's unhealthy and unsafe conditions.

Thousands of refugees are currently housed in squalid makeshift camps at Cox's Bazar, near Bangladesh's border with Burma's Rakhine state. The refugees fled to Bangladesh to escape violent attacks by the Burmese army. The camps are desperately short of clean water, sanitary facilities, proper health care and food.

The Rohingya refugees oppose their relocation to Bhasan Char, which emerged from the muddy waters of the Bay of Bengal less than 20 years ago and is situated at the mouth of the Meghna River.

The refugees legitimately fear that Bhasan Char, which is 30 kilometres from the mainland and accessible only by boat, will be a virtual prison. The Rohingya will be housed in tiny, breeze-block concrete rooms 2m x 2.5m, with small, steel-barred windows.

According to Momen, the government has drawn up plans to shift 100,000 refugees to Bhasan Char initially and another 400,000, within a "year or two." Bangladesh initially planned to send about 700,000 refugees to the island by the end of 2018. Momen told Deutsche Welle that if the "they are not willing [to go to Bhasan Char], we will force them."

While the UN has not made an official statement on the government's brutal plan, Deutsche Welle has reported that UN officials made off-the-record comments voicing their concerns. They warned that "refugees may be contained on the island for years and their freedom of movement severely restricted." They added that "splitting operations between Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char is logistically difficult." Local and international human rights organisations have already raised their opposition.

Since the mass exodus of Rohingyas in response to the Burmese military's intensification of violent attacks in August 2017, the total number of refugees in Bangladesh is now more than one million. Prior to 2017, there were nearly 400,000 who had fled Burma. According to the latest figures, over 905,000 are living in extremely congested refugee camps and more than 231,000 are in other makeshift accommodation. Fifty-five percent of the refugees are children.

The Rohingyas are an oppressed Muslim minority many of whom have lived for generations in Burma's north-western Rakhine state. They were stripped of their citizenship rights by the Burmese government in 1982 and suffered torture, sexual assault and had their homes and villages torched by the military "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" operations.

The Bangladesh government attempted at first to use its military to block the refugees in 2017 but was forced, in the face of international outcry against the ferocious Burmese military attacks, to allow them to enter the country. Hundreds of refugees lost their lives attempting to escape Burma by sailing across the Bay of Bengal.

Momen told Deutsche Welle that the Bangladeshi government was disappointed that there had not been enough international pressure on Burma to take back the Rohingyas.

Dhaka is using various means to make life as difficult

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as possible for the refugees to pressure them to return to Burma.

On September 8, government authorities banned mobile services and sim-cards for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees, claiming that they were being used for illegal activities. Sim-cards can be purchased by Bangladeshis with national identity cards. Phone signals and mobile internet services have already been blocked at certain times in Cox's Bazar and other camps with all data and internet access blocked every day between 5 p.m. and 5 a.m.

The Bangladeshi government has also suspended relief work among the refugees by 41 out of the 139 non-governmental organisations operating in the country, claiming that they were encouraging illegal activity. The NGOs, in fact, do almost all the relief and assistance work in the camps.

Momen denounced the aid agencies opposed to Bhasan Char relocations. He absurdly declared that the refugees did not want to leave what he claimed was "five-star hotel" accommodation in Cox's Bazar. In an attempt to whip-up hostility against the NGOs, he also accused them of "politicising" the refugee issue.

Momen's provocative attacks intensified on August 22, after another attempt by the Bangladeshi government to repatriate a group Rohingyas back to Burma failed. While almost 300 refugee families, or about 3,450 people, had been selected for repatriation they refused to go. After discovering their names on the Bangladeshi government's list, some families and individuals went into hiding or fled the camps. At least 100,000 refugees rallied on August 25 to remember the second anniversary of the military crackdown.

Political justification for the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, of which East Pakistan now Bangladesh was part, was purportedly to "safeguard the rights" of Muslims. The brutal treatment of Rohingya Muslim refugees by the Bangladeshi ruling elite further underscores the reactionary nature of the nation-state system created in the partition of the Indian subcontinent by the national bourgeoisie in collaboration with British imperialism after World War II.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees are treated the same way in all countries across South Asia. Currently in neighbouring Assam, an Indian north-eastern state, almost two million residents have been excluded from the National Register of Citizens and labelled as " foreigners " by Indian Prime Minister Modi's Hindu-chauvinist government. Many of these are Muslims who are accused of being "illegal infiltrators" and face the threat of mass roundups, detention and expulsion.

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