

Bangladesh government begins to forcibly remove Rohingya refugees

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The Bangladesh government has started shipping Rohingya refugees to the isolated and unsafe Bhasan Char island, 34 kilometres from the mainland. At the same time, as the result of an intervention by China, Dhaka is again also seeking to send Rohingyas back to Myanmar, from where they fled the regime's genocidal violence.

There are over one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government considers them a burden to the country, and has branded them a "security" threat. They are treated inhumanly, condemned to live under miserable conditions.

They are currently housed in 34 squalid refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Ukhia and Teknaf Upazilas, about 350 kilometres from Dhaka. These encampments—the most densely overcrowded refugee camps in the world—have no adequate water supply, sanitation and sewage facilities, constantly threatening the asylum seekers with the spread of various diseases.

The government plans to move some 100,000 refugees to Bhasan Char, an unstable, cyclone-prone island formed by the accumulation of silt where the River Meghna enters the Bay of Bengal. Prior to 2006, the mud island did not exist.

Hasina's government was forced to halt a previous attempt to relocate Rohingyas to Bhasan Char because of domestic and international criticism. About 300 asylum seekers were sent to the island last May after they tried to escape to Malaysia on a boat.

Dhaka has rejected those criticisms, now insisting the island is safe enough and began the new relocation in early December. Human rights activists told the media the authorities have used both cash enticements and coercion to send batches of people.

The government has so far sent about 6,700

refugees—two groups in December totalling 3,446 people and two groups in January with 3,254. The fourth group was removed on January 30, with 1,466 refugees taken in four ships from Chattogram port.

Meanwhile, China launched an initiative to arrange a January 19 tripartite agreement with Bangladesh and Myanmar for the "repatriation" of refugees back to Myanmar. Myanmar "agreed" to accept some 42,000 refugees, but that tentative agreement contained no guarantees that it will be met.

Two previous repatriation attempts, in November 2018 and August 2019, failed. Refugees refused to go, fearing further atrocities by the Myanmar military and Buddhist supremacists.

In 2017, the Myanmar government's military brutality in Rakhine State, joined by Buddhist thugs, forced some 750,000 Rohingyas to flee across the border to Bangladesh. They joined about 300,000 refugees who had fled previous persecution.

China's intervention is significant. Myanmar's continued refusal to take back refugees has heightened tensions with Bangladesh. It appears that China sought to use the issue to strengthen its influence on Dhaka by prevailing on the Myanmar authorities to accept an agreement.

China was the source of \$US1,159 million foreign direct investment in Bangladesh during the fiscal year 2019, or 30 percent of Bangladesh's total.

During the January 19 meeting, Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen insisted that repatriation of the refugees should start from the first quarter of this year. But Myanmar's Deputy Minister for International Cooperation U Hau Do Suan said they could start only in the second quarter of this year.

Reflecting the Bangladeshi government's frustration, the country's media has cast renewed doubts over the

implementation of the agreement because Myanmar's military seized control of the country in a coup on February 1.

Bangladesh Enterprise Institute president M. Humayun Kabir told the *Daily Star* on February 2: "I think the Rohingya repatriation process will slow down because the military government will be more involved in its administrative and internal issues."

The Bangladeshi government's own brutal treatment of the Rohingyas was exposed when 300 refugees housed on Bhasan Char staged a hunger strike last September, demanding to join their families in Cox's Bazar, because of the terrible conditions on the island.

Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, last October accused naval officers of assaulting refugees, saying they "beat Rohingya refugees, including children, who were protesting their detention and begging to return to their families in Cox's Bazar."

One refugee reported: "Navy personnel used tree branches and black rubber sticks to beat us."

The country's human rights organisation Odhikar accused the authorities of killing more than 100 Rohingya refugees in extrajudicial executions between August 2017 and July 2020, purportedly in crackdowns on the illegal drug trade.

The government used the COVID-19 pandemic to impose a "complete lockdown" in the camps last April. Crackdowns were carried out, shops run by refugees closed, internet services were blocked and mobile phones were confiscated.

In reality, the refugees have been left exposed to COVID-19. The first coronavirus death in Cox's Bazar was reported in late May when Bangladesh's total death toll stood at around 700 and cases exceeded 50,000. Because of the government's low testing rates, the situation in the camps remains unclear.

The World Health Organisation reported in early December that among the refugees: "A total of 363 COVID-19 cases have been reported out of 19,651 samples tested. The total number of deaths stood at 10."

Now the pandemic is spreading rapidly throughout the country. As of Tuesday, total deaths stood at 8,149 and cases at 536,107, but both figures are understatements because of the low rate of testing.

UNICEF last August said the pandemic had disrupted life for more than 460,000 Rohingya children, whose

education facilities in the camps had been closed since March. The government has provided no alternative methods of education.

In fact, the Bangladesh government's callous attitude toward the refugees mirrors that of the Myanmar regime. In October, Human Rights Watch criticised Myanmar for accommodating about 130,000 Rohingyas in camps "under squalid and abusive conditions, which are like 'open prisons'" for "eight years, cut off from their homes, land, and livelihoods."



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