

Massive deadly fires in Bangladesh's Rohingya refugee camp

Mike Head
23 March 2021

Terrible fires tore through the world's largest refugee camp, at Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, on Monday night, leaving at least 15 Rohingya refugees dead, 400 more missing, and tens of thousands without shelter.

The blazes, the cause of which remains officially under investigation, highlight the shocking plight of the Rohingya refugees. Having been driven out of neighbouring Myanmar, mostly since 2017, nearly 900,000 remain trapped in squalid and unsafe shanty towns in one of the poorest countries in the world.

The major powers continue to shut their borders to them and the millions of other people globally fleeing repression and poverty, compounded by the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yesterday, based on provisional reports, the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, said that in addition to the confirmed deaths more than 560 refugees had been injured and some 45,000 had lost their shelters and belongings in the inferno. Those figures were expected to climb as assessments continued.

Officials said the fires were believed to have started in one of the 34 camps at Cox's Bazar before spreading to two other camps. Thick columns of smoke were seen billowing from blazing shanties and tents in videos shared on social media, as volunteer residents, firefighters and aid workers battled the flames and pulled people to safety.

Eye-witnesses described harrowing scenes. "People were turning to ashes in front of my eyes," Saiful Arakani, a 25-year-old refugee who tried to rescue people, told the BBC. "I saw people fleeing their homes screaming, 'Save my mother, save my sister.' It was complete chaos. No one knew what to do."

A Save the Children volunteer, Tayeba Begum, said: "The fire spread so quickly that before we understood what happened it caught our house. People were

screaming and running here and there. Children were also running scattered, crying for their family. It is the most horrific incident I have witnessed recently."

The fire started around 4:00 pm on Monday and firefighters almost doused it an hour later. But another wave of fires broke out shortly after 11:00 pm and fires were still burning down shanties as of 12:30 am, refugees said.

Some witnesses said barbed wire fencing recently erected around the camps had trapped many people, causing some of the casualties.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) stated: "Early reports indicate that newly installed barbed wire fencing seriously restricted the ability of refugees to flee the fire, including especially vulnerable women and girls." The IRC said the fire had also destroyed health clinics, mosques, community centres and an IRC safe space for women.

The blazes were the largest of multiple fires in the camp this year. Just four days earlier, on Friday, two separate fires at the camps destroyed scores of shanties. Two big blazes also hit the camps in January, leaving thousands homeless and gutting four UNICEF schools.

Amnesty International's South Asia campaigner, Saad Hammadi, tweeted that the "frequency of fire in the camps is too coincidental, especially when outcomes of previous investigations into the incidents are not known and they keep repeating."

The Bangladesh government has been pushing for 100,000 of the refugees to relocate to Bhasan Char island, 60 kilometres from the mainland. So far, about 13,000 Rohingya have been shipped to the flood- and cyclone-prone muddy outcrop, which was formed in 2006 by the accumulation of silt where the River Meghna enters the Bay of Bengal.

At the same time, the government is again seeking to

send Rohingyas back to Myanmar, from where they fled the genocidal violence of the military, backed by Aung San Suu Kyi, who was the de facto leader of the government until the military coup of February 1.

Altogether, there are over one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, with some living in miserable conditions in urban areas. Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government considers them a burden to the country, and has branded them a "security" threat, fuelling media witch hunts against them.

The Cox's Bazar camps are among the most overcrowded refugee encampments in the world, with more than 40,000 people per square kilometre. They have no adequate water supply, sanitation or sewage facilities, constantly threatening the spread of various diseases, including COVID-19.

Those bearing direct responsibility for the inhuman treatment of the Rohingya, a mostly Muslim minority who have lived in Myanmar for centuries, include Suu Kyi. In December 2019, she appeared in the International Court of Justice in The Hague as a crass apologist for the country's military against charges of human rights abuses, including genocide, against the Rohingya.

Since 2017, the military in Myanmar has again engaged in brutal operations to terrorise the Rohingya population, who are denied citizenship rights and branded "illegal immigrants." A UN fact-finding mission found that military forces had killed more than 10,000 people, destroyed almost 400 villages and driven close to 750,000 Rohingya out of their homes.

But Suu Kyi claimed that the exodus of Rohingya was simply the result of the conflict between the military and armed Rohingya separatist groups, not a conscious policy of ethnic cleansing.

Equal responsibility lies with the governments in the advanced countries internationally, including those in Australia, that have refused asylum for the Rohingya.

Successive Australian governments, both Labor Party and Liberal-National Coalition, have repelled Rohingya refugee boats and incarcerated any refugees who got to Australia, often on isolated Pacific or Indian Ocean islands, or subjected them to impoverished conditions, without basic rights, on insecure temporary visas.

Globally, the responses of governments to the COVID pandemic have taken the world's refugee crisis to a new level. By last May, 177 countries had either

fully or partially closed their borders, abrogating the right to asylum.

According to the latest statistics available from the UNHCR, in December 2019, even before the pandemic, at least 79.5 million people around the world had been forced to flee their homes. There were also millions of stateless people, denied access to basic rights such as education, health care, employment and freedom of movement.

The treatment of the Rohingyas is matched by the reaction of the Biden administration in the US to the human exodus underway from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, all countries long subjected to US-backed poverty and repression. The US government has closed its doors and is detaining 15,000 unaccompanied children as lawbreakers.

Similar measures are being taken across Europe, causing mass drownings to continue unabated in the Mediterranean Sea in the opening months of 2021.

Such is the cruel, irrational response of the capitalist system to human suffering on an unprecedented scale, from Asia to Africa and the Americas. This poses the necessity for the international working class to unite across national borders against the ruling financial elites on the basis of a worldwide socialist program.

That requires the unconditional defence of the right of workers to live and work in the country of their choice, with full citizenship rights, including the right to health care, a liveable income and the ability to work and travel without fear of repression or deportation.



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