

The Bangladesh refugee camp inferno and capitalism's global war on migrants

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The horrific fire that swept through the massive Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh on Monday constitutes an indictment not only of the Bangladeshi authorities, but of capitalist governments around the world. From South Asia and Australia to Europe and the United States, governments, whether nominally "left" or openly right-wing, have subjected tens of millions of desperate and impoverished people fleeing oppression and poverty to barbaric persecution.

The blaze, whose cause remains under investigation, rapidly consumed squalid shanties that house a million Rohingya refugees who fled the murderous operations of the military in neighbouring Myanmar. The fire gutted some 10,000 dwellings as well as community centres, schools and other structures, leaving as many as 60,000 homeless and in need of food, water, shelter and medicine.

As of this writing, 15 people are confirmed dead, but the number could rapidly rise as at least 400 people, mostly children, are still missing. Another 560 people were injured.

Barbed wire fencing surrounding the camps hindered people fleeing the fire and contributed to the terrible toll. Lack of water enabled the fire to spread unchecked until it was finally brought under control by firefighters some six hours later.

Bangladesh's refugee commissioner, Shah Rezwana Hayat, had dismissed calls by international humanitarian agencies for the removal of the fences, absurdly claiming that their erection was "to ensure the safety and security of the Rohingya people." In reality, the barbed wire surrounds what can only be characterized as a huge concentration camp, imprisoning hundreds of thousands of people without access to the most basic services, including clean water and sanitation.

The Bangladeshi government has treated the Rohingya refugees with outright hostility, tarring them as criminals and scapegoating them for the country's lack of essential services. After attempting to block them from entering the country, then detaining them in shocking conditions in the Cox's Bazar camps, it is now seeking to force them into permanent accommodation on Bhasan Char Island, an isolated, unstable, flood- and cyclone-prone mud flat, or compel them to return to Myanmar, with no guarantees for their safety.

More than 700,000 of the refugees currently in Bangladesh fled Myanmar in 2017 after the military launched systematic attacks on the Muslim Rohingya minority, carrying out murder, rape and the burning of villages. In 2018, Andrew Gilmour, the UN assistant secretary-general for human rights, characterized the military's operations as "ethnic cleansing."

Myanmar's de-facto government leader at the time, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been universally hailed in the West as an "icon of democracy," defended the military's atrocities, appearing at the International Court of Justice in 2019 to deny the irrefutable evidence of human rights abuses. Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy, like the military, are mired in Burmese Buddhist chauvinism and brand the Rohingya as illegal immigrants, even though they have lived in the country for centuries.

Unlike the country's other ethnic groups, the Rohingya have no citizenship rights and are thus reduced to the status of a stateless minority, not welcome in Myanmar, Bangladesh or anywhere else in the world.

The responsibility for this week's terrible fire rests not just with the ruling elites in Bangladesh and Myanmar, but with the ruling classes around the world,

which have shut their borders and vilified refugees and immigrants.

Not surprisingly, the blaze that swept through the Cox's Bazar detention camps has been all but ignored in the US and international media. No offers of aid have come from Western governments to assist in rehousing, feeding and supplying medical care.

While the brutal treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar is recognized as a crime against humanity, the victims are treated with indifference and contempt. Should they seek a better life in the advanced capitalist countries, they are met with guns, prison cells and detention camps.

The Rohingya are part of the surging tide of humanity forced to flee war, oppression and poverty produced by the deepening crisis of global capitalism. According to the latest UN statistics, dating from 2019, there are at least 79.5 million stateless people around the world, many of them confined in fetid, crowded refugee camps in economically backward countries like Bangladesh.

The callous treatment of the Rohingya by the Bangladeshi government is paralleled in countries around the world. The Biden administration is just as intent as was Trump in blocking the entry of refugees fleeing oppression and poverty in Latin America produced by more than a century of plunder by US imperialism. Those who reach the border, including some 15,000 unaccompanied children, are treated as criminals and locked up.

The European powers have instituted measures to police their land and sea borders, leading to mass drownings in the Mediterranean.

Australian governments pioneered the use of the Navy to block refugees by sea and indefinitely incarcerate arrivals in offshore detention centres. Thousands have been confined to remote Pacific islands for years, without any possibility of Australian residency even if granted refugee status.

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly intensified the global crisis of capitalism and all its contradictions, accelerating the drive to war, the resort to police state measures and authoritarian and fascist forms of rule, and the relentless assault on the social position of the working class.

The toxic fumes of nationalism and xenophobia that are being whipped up by every ruling class are intended to turn explosive social tensions outwards—either by

scapegoating some of the world's most vulnerable people as "illegal aliens," or beating the drums of war against an external enemy.

The failure of governments to recognize the basic democratic right to asylum is another demonstration that there is no constituency in ruling circles in any country for the defence of democratic rights.

The global pandemic, however, is producing an upsurge in the class struggle, as workers oppose the attempts by governments and corporations to force them to work in unsafe and unhealthy workplaces, and to accept deep inroads into their jobs, conditions and wages in order to boost profits.

As the world hurtles towards war and economic disaster, workers need to reject the poison of nationalism and racism, unite their struggles internationally, and defend the rights of every section of working people, including the millions of refugees being persecuted across the globe.



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