



BRIEFING PAPER

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Coronavirus: Fears for the Rohingya

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Refugees camps are [especially vulnerable to serious outbreaks](#) of Covid-19. Why? Because they are high density settlements with poor access to water and sanitation and limited health services, and because the camps rely on host communities who themselves have limited means.

Here we look at the conditions in the world's largest refugee settlement, Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled.

Why are refugee camps particularly vulnerable?

In March 2020 the UN launched a [£2 billion global humanitarian response plan](#) to assist the world's poorest countries fight the coronavirus pandemic. The UN Secretary General [talked of the need to protect the ultra-vulnerable](#), the millions of people who have been forced to flee their homes and find themselves crammed into refugee camps where:

They do not have homes in which to socially distance or self-isolate.

They lack clean water and soap with which to do that most basic act of self-protection against the virus – washing their hands.

And should they become critically ill, they have no way of accessing a healthcare system that can provide a hospital bed and a ventilator.

There are over 70 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 25.9 million refugees.

[UNHCR](#)

What does this mean for the Rohingya?

Since August 2017 Muslim Rohingya refugees have fled violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar, into Bangladesh. Over [850,000 refugees](#) are now living in highly congested conditions in 34 refugee camps around Cox's Bazar, a town on the southeastern coast of Bangladesh. Cox's Bazar is often described as the [world's largest refugee settlement](#).

Alongside the refugees are the host communities, which [number around 440,000 people](#).

There are also large numbers of international [aid workers living there](#).

Has coronavirus been reported in Cox's Bazar?

The Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) brings together the main humanitarian actors who work with Bangladeshi and Rohingya communities. They provide [regular updates](#) on the situation in Cox's Bazar district.

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The ISCG reported that as of 5 April 2020 [no cases of Covid-19](#) had been reported in the refugee camps and that one confirmed case of a Bangladeshi returnee from overseas had been reported in the local community in Cox's Bazar.

It is difficult to verify figures from the camps because of a lack of testing equipment. The British Medical Journal warned in March "[currently there is no mechanism to test refugees for covid-19—the only testing facilities are in Dhaka, 400 km away](#)".

What are the risks to the Rohingya?

Humanitarian groups like the International Rescue Committee are concerned that [people in refugee camps face a heightened risk of Covid-19](#). One medical doctor, working with the IRC in Cox's Bazar, explained the dangers: "[they live in very congested camp conditions, also their hygiene and sanitation facilities are not adequate. It is really difficult for them to practice social distancing.](#)"

The UN has warned that, given the conditions in the camps in Bangladesh and the high levels of vulnerability among the population, "[the severity of the possible impact of the virus on refugees is of major concern](#)".

John Hopkins Centre for Humanitarian Research studied the [potential impact of coronavirus on the Rohingya refugee camps](#) in Bangladesh. In the pre peer-review report of the findings, published on 18 March, the authors suggest that modelling different scenarios produced between 424,000 and 591,000 infections over a 12 month period, assuming no interventions. The authors also found that, in almost all their simulations, the "[hospitalisation needs, in terms of beds alone, significantly exceeded capacities](#)".

How are the camps preparing?

On 25 March the Bangladesh Government said only [essential services and assistance will continue](#) in the camps until further notice. This means schools, shops and community centres have closed and all gatherings have been suspended. All health and nutrition facilities, food and gas distribution and hygiene promotion and distribution will remain open.

The ISCG provides regular updates on measures underway in the camps to combat covid-19. According to the [5 April 2020 update](#) the priority is to establish isolation and treatment facilities, with planning underway to prepare an initial 1,700 beds across the District.

However, Cox's Bazar lacks facilities to provide intensive care treatment, oxygen supplies and adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers. Non-medical grade cloth masks are being made and distributed.

One of the main measures in reducing transmission of the virus is regularly washing hands. The ISCG says over 485,000 bars of soap have been distributed and nearly 6,000 handwashing stations installed in public places.

Calls for mobile internet to be restored

One of the main challenges for refugees and aid workers living there is the lack of internet connectivity. The Bangladesh Government imposed restrictions on mobile internet access in Cox's Bazar in September 2019, citing [security concerns](#).

On 30 March 2020 the Bangladeshi Home Minister [confirmed restrictions](#) on 3G and 4G mobile data will remain in place. The following day, on 1 April 2020, fifty human rights organisations, including Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and several British based community groups, [wrote a letter](#) to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister calling for these

restrictions to be lifted. The letter said "[access to information is an essential component of an effective public health response to a pandemic](#)".

UNHCR is not a signatory to the letter but is similarly [urging the Bangladeshi Government](#) to ease restrictions to enable families to communicate and assist humanitarian agencies provide vital services. The BBC South Asia correspondent, reporting on the lack of internet access, says health warnings are being [shared by loudspeaker via rickshaws](#), but residents lack information about coronavirus and how to protect themselves.

What is the Bangladesh Government doing?

The Government issued its [National Response Plan for Covid-19](#) on 16 March 2020. The Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) [fully supports](#) the Bangladesh Government's plan which, it says, includes the refugee population.

On 26 March the Government ordered a nationwide ten-day shut down, later extended to 14 April.

What is the international response?

The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, made clear when launching the £2 billion global humanitarian response fund why supporting those most in need matters:

The world is only as strong as our weakest health system. If we do not take decisive action now, I fear the virus will establish a foothold in the most fragile countries, leaving the whole world vulnerable as it continues to circle the planet, paying no mind to borders.

The humanitarian community, via the ISCG, is [calling for more international support](#) for Bangladesh. The ISCG said it is planning an additional appeal alongside the pre-coronavirus 2020 Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis. The [Joint Response Plan](#) is a pre-existing plan to support the 1.3 million people in need – both Rohingya refugees and host communities – with a total requirement of \$817 million. Details of the new appeal had not been made available at the time of writing.

On 6 April 2020 the UK announced [£21 million to support Bangladesh to fight Covid-19](#). Of this, more than £10 million is for existing UN and NGO partners to maintain essential humanitarian services and prepare Rohingya and host communities for Covid-19. The British High Commission in Dhaka said this will help establish treatment centres and personal hygiene efforts.

The UK has been a major humanitarian aid donor to the refugees. Baroness Sugg, the International Development Minister, visited Cox's Bazar and Myanmar in October 2019 and described the condition in the camps as [terrible](#). The International Development Secretary announced a new [£87 million package](#) for sustaining the Rohingya refugee operation in Cox's Bazar in September 2019. This brought the total UK contribution since the start of the crisis in August 2017 to £226 million.

Members of Parliament have also actively engaged with the Rohingya situation. In its September 2019 report, [A New Shape of Catastrophe: Two years on from the 2017 Rohingya Crisis](#), the APPG on the Rights of the Rohingya warned that continued violence and discrimination against the Rohingya in Myanmar means conditions are still unsafe for refugees to return, putting continued pressure on the camps in Bangladesh.

The Rohingya in Myanmar

Human Rights Watch has warned Rohingya camps are "[Covid-19 tinderboxes](#)" and that Myanmar is ill-equipped to cope with the potential caseload. The UN says about 128,000

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Rohingya are being “[effectively detained](#)” in government camps in Rakhine state in Myanmar.

A more detailed analysis of how the Rohingya refugee crisis developed and the response of the UK and international community can be found in Library briefing paper [Myanmar: January 2020 update](#)

Further reading

- [Myanmar: January 2020 update](#), Library briefing paper CBP08443. This discusses the Rohingya crisis and political developments in Myanmar and the UK government’s position. Previous Library briefings have used the term Burma.
- [Reliefweb](#) – source of updates, situation report and infographics from humanitarian agencies, hosted by UN OCHA.
- [Humanitarian Response: Bangladesh](#) Additional source of updates and situation reports from humanitarian agencies.
- [Q&A with the chief of UNHCR Public Health section on coronavirus and refugees](#), UNHCR, 27 March 2020
- [Detailed profiles of the camps](#) in Bangladesh: UNHCR
- John Hopkins report, [Novel Coronavirus: Projecting the impact in Rohingya refugee camps and beyond](#), 18 March 2020

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