

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

<b>Bilagsnr.:</b>	<b>614</b>
Land:	Myanmar
Kilde:	Radio Free Asia (RFA)
Titel:	Junta offers villages, but Rohingya won't return without guarantees
Udgivet:	5. september 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	19. november 2023



Document #2097956

## RFA – Radio Free Asia (Author)

### Junta offers villages, but Rohingya won't return without guarantees

Refugees in Bangladesh want citizenship and the right to resettle their old communities.

Myanmar's junta has pledged to build 20 villages as part of a plan to repatriate thousands of Muslim Rohingya who fled a crackdown to neighboring Bangladesh, but members of the ethnic group say they don't trust the regime and won't accept the offer.

Myanmar's government has made at least two attempts to invite Rohingya back to the country since the military carried out a brutal offensive in their home state of Rakhine in August 2017, but with little success.

About 1 million Rohingya, including about 740,000 who fled the offensive, live mostly in crowded and sprawling refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in southeastern Bangladesh.

On Tuesday, Union Minister Ko Ko Hlaing told state-owned media that 7,000 Rohingya will be repatriated from Bangladesh camps to Myanmar by the end of the rainy season next month.

He said 20 new villages will be constructed for the Rohingyas and that plots for 1,000 houses had already been cleared for those who return. The union minister claimed that China and "other members of the international community" had agreed to provide assistance in building additional homes.

The comments came days after the junta invited officials from foreign embassies – including Bangladesh, Thailand, and Sri Lanka – to examine arrangements for readmitting Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

### **'Just for show'**

But while the junta appears to be rolling out the red carpet to the Rohingya, residents of the camps in Bangladesh told RFA Burmese they believe the offer is a trick.

"They are doing it just for show, due to international pressure," said Ali Jaina, a Rohingya living in the Balukhali refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. "They have been putting on these kinds of shows since we arrived [in Bangladesh]. But no one has gone back."

Ali Jaina said that the Rohingya in Bangladesh "have no confidence" in the junta.

"How can they give us peace when they can't even make peace with the ethnic groups who already live there?" he said.

Since seizing power in a February 2021 coup d'état, Myanmar's military has become embroiled in a multifront conflict with an armed resistance and multiple ethnic armies based in the country's remote border regions.

Junta troops have killed more than 4,000 civilians since the takeover, according to Thailand's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).

Al Jaina dismissed the junta's plan to repatriate Rohingya as a "program that will move refugees from one camp to another," and suggested that those who accept will face an even worse food crisis than they do in Bangladesh, due to restrictions their ethnic group faces in Myanmar.

### **'No desire' to return without guarantees**

Another Rohingya at a camp in Bangladesh said they would only return if they are guaranteed citizenship, access to education, freedom of movement, and the right to resettle their original land.

"If we are provided with these, we will go back right away," the refugee said, speaking on condition of anonymity citing fear of reprisal. "No one would need to plan for our return or persuade us to go back - we would do it ourselves. If not, none of us are going to go back. We have no desire to do so."

Union Minister Ko Ko Hlaing has said that returnees will be issued a "screening card" for citizenship, although they will need to apply. Rohingya who want to return to their original communities can do so "with official approval from village and state authorities," he said.

Attempts by RFA to contact Hla Thein, the junta's spokesman for Rakhine state, for comment on the screening process for readmitting Rohingya went unanswered Tuesday.

Nay San Lwin, co-founder of the Free Rohingya Coalition, said that the junta's readmission plan will fail because it does not provide any substantial opportunities for the Rohingya refugees.

"The key to the readmission process is providing the Rohingya with the right to citizenship and [recognition of their] ethnicity," he said. "Without these, no one will return. Simply moving refugees from the camps in Bangladesh to other camps on the Myanmar side won't be successful."

In 2018 and 2019, Myanmar and Bangladesh made two attempts to repatriate some 6,000 Rohingya. However, with no guarantees of citizenship or resettlement of original communities, no one accepted the offer.

Based on an analysis of the situation in Rakhine state, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said on March 19 that conditions were not acceptable for the Rohingyas to return home for the foreseeable future.

*Translated by Myo Min Aung. Edited by Joshua Lipas and Malcolm Foster.*

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**ecoi.net description:**

Junta offers displaced Rohingya return to villages in Myanmar; Rohingya want citizenship and right to resettle in old communities

**Country:**

Myanmar

**Source:**

[RFA – Radio Free Asia](#) (Author)

**Original link:**

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/offer-09052023154522.html>

**Document type:**

## Media Report

**Language:**  
English

**Published:**  
5 September 2023

**Available on ecoi.net since:**  
29 September 2023

**Document ID:**  
2097956

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Austrian Red Cross Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)	Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien T +43 1 589 00 583 F +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net	Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice
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