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Bangladesh: Rohingya rejected again

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Bangladesh won't recognize thousands of asylum-seekers, as health experts decry their plight.



A Rohingya asylum-seeker waits for help in Kutupalong, Bangladesh, Sept. 11, 2009. AFP

BANGKOK – Bangladesh has rejected a U.N. proposal that it grant refugee status to tens of thousands of ethnic minority Muslims from Burma who fled in hope of asylum and a better life, Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Mohamed Mijarul Quayes has said.

"They must go back to their land," Quayes told reporters Saturday in the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka, according to news reports.

Some 200,000 Rohingya, ethnic Muslims who live in fear of arrest and deportation and lack

access to the services provided at international refugee camps, have fled to Bangladesh from Burma, whose authorities don't recognize them as citizens.

Bangladesh does recognize as refugees some 28,000 Rohingya who live in two official camps run by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Bangladesh government.

Quayes said Bangladesh won't extend that recognition to any more asylum-seekers. Authorities in Bangladesh fear recognizing them would encourage a flood of new migrants.

'Not possible'

"We have categorically informed him [the U.N. regional coordinator] that this is not possible," Quayes told reporters at a Foreign Ministry briefing, referring to a proposal to recognize the 200,000 unregistered Rohingya.

He said Bangladesh is ready to work with the United Nations on giving access and protection to 28,000 Rohingya refugees in the two official camps.

But he added, "We don't want to discuss about the rest of the Myanmar [Burmese] nationals living elsewhere in Bangladesh illegally."

"We have not dumped them in concentration camps," Quayes said. He also took aim at international media and NGOs for publicizing what he called "untrue" stories about the Rohingya.

International right groups have alleged that Dhaka is cracking down on the group, arresting and repatriating many and stepping up security along the porous border to prevent more from arriving.

In 1992, 250,000 Rohingya, around one-third of their total population, fled over Burma's border into Bangladesh, citing persecution in Burma. But since 1993, the government has denied 200,000 subsequent Rohingya arrivals official refugee status, making them ineligible for U.N. aid and protection.

In a recent report, the U.N. Special Rapporteur voiced "deep concern" over the plight of the Rohingya in the northern part of Burma, which doesn't recognize the Rohingya as one of 135 registered ethnic minorities.

According to New York-based Human Rights Watch, abuses by Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies against those who have fled "are reported to be widespread in and around Rohingya refugee camps, including reports of sexual violence against women."

"In the two official refugee camps of Nayapara and Kutupalong, people are routinely punished for traveling outside the camp to find food or money and often must resort to selling meager rations to corrupt camp officials or outside merchants," it said.

"Authorities refuse to permit permanent structures to be built in the camps as a way of encouraging refugees to return home. Children are denied access to education. The provision of health services and access to medicines is also limited by the authorities, as are work and livelihood opportunities inside the camp."

'One of the worst'

But the unregistered Rohingya asylum-seekers are suffering even more without food, education, medical care, clean water, or sanitation, according to Richard Sollom of Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights.

"I've been to a number of refugee camps around the world and I would say that this is one of the worst – at the unofficial camp in Kutupalong," Sollom said in an interview here.

They live in "makeshift dwellings of ripped plastic and twigs and bark that is gathered from the woods nearby ... given the upcoming monsoon season, this is going to be an issue not only for their shelter, but for the spread of infectious diseases," he said.

The Rohingya in Bangladesh suffer further from chronic and acute malnutrition, which causes stunting, cognitive impairment, and developmental delays in children, he said. "This is from years of being underfed – and not receiving the proper nutrients."

Bangladeshi police and border security forces have been conducting hour-to-house searches for the Rohingya and continue to deport them to Burma, he said.

"Eighteen percent of the children surveyed [in the Kutupalong makeshift camp] have acute malnutrition," Sollom said.

"[When the number reaches] over 15 percent – the U.N. World Health Organization determines that is a critical emergency requiring immediate food aid to be delivered to this population through the entire camp, not only the children."

When he asked the Rohingya to show him their possessions, Sollom said, "nine out of 10

brought out two aluminum pots, some roots they had gathered, a spoon, a knife, and a plastic bucket to collect water.

Grim options

Back in Burma, according to Chris Beyrer, a medical doctor who has spent years working with Burmese refugees, health indices aren't much better, with six times as many children dying before age five there as in neighboring Thailand.

The Rohingya drew global attention last year when the Thai military was accused of towing the boats of as many as 1,000 asylum-seekers out to sea and leaving them to drift at the mercy of the currents without adequate food and water.

The Rohingya themselves say they are Muslim descendants of Persian, Turkish, Bengali, and Pathan traders, who migrated to Burma as early as the 7th century A.D. But their ethnic identity isn't widely recognized.

Rights groups say they are particularly vulnerable to human traffickers, and their case is now being taken up by the Bali Process, a human-smuggling summit involving more than 40 regional nations.

Original reporting by RFA's Burmese service. Burmese service director: Nancy Shwe. Additional reporting and English production by Sarah Jackson-Han.

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