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Save the Children

**“HORRORS I WILL
NEVER FORGET”**

The stories of Rohingya children

Introduction

Since 25 August 2017, Bangladesh has seen an unprecedented arrival of Rohingya refugees fleeing violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State. To date more than 600,000 people have crossed the border, at a speed of displacement the world has not witnessed since the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

Those who have fled speak of seeing children targeted for brutal sexual violence, and killed and maimed indiscriminately. Countless people have experienced denial of humanitarian assistance. Others have told us of their children being abducted, or of living in fear of their children being taken away.

These appalling crimes amount to grave violations against children in conflict. They must stop and those carrying them out must be held to account.

Save the Children is helping children who have made the journey from Myanmar into Bangladesh to recover from their horrific experiences. Through our programmes we have spoken with children and their families who have experienced and witnessed crimes. We have asked them if we can share their stories in an effort to highlight how children have been, and continue to be, targeted by military operations inside Myanmar.

This collection of testimonies is the product of those interviews. It paints a disturbing picture of the horrors that children have been through. Almost every child we've spoken to has witnessed a family member or someone from their community killed. Others tell of being caught up in atrocities,

witnessing massacres or being taken away to be raped. They have seen and experienced things that no child should ever see, and many are deeply traumatised as a result.

Their testimonies corroborate violations documented by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The acts described are consistent, recurring and appalling.

With almost 60% of the refugee population under the age of 18 this is truly a children's emergency, and this collection of testimonies gives a voice to these children. By recording these grave violations against children we send a clear message to those responsible that these atrocities will not be tolerated.

We must act now.

Warning: This report contains content relating to violence against children and adults, including sexual violence, that some readers may find distressing.



In the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar district, where there are widespread shortages of food, water and shelter, heavy rainfall has made a desperate situation even worse. (Photo: GMB Akash/Panos Pictures/Save the Children)

Background

On 25 August 2017, fighters associated with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked police posts and military checkpoints in Maungdaw, Rathedaung and Buthidaung townships in northern Rakhine State, Myanmar. There have also been reports of violence by ARSA against members of the public in the days preceding 25 August.

The response of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) and other Myanmar security forces has been both violent and indiscriminate, causing a huge displacement of families to the southern region of Bangladesh.

Now more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees, the majority of whom are children, are living in camps, makeshift settlements and amongst the host community in the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh. Having arrived hungry, exhausted and with just the clothes on their backs, many are now living in particularly dire conditions, completely dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive.



Grave violations against children

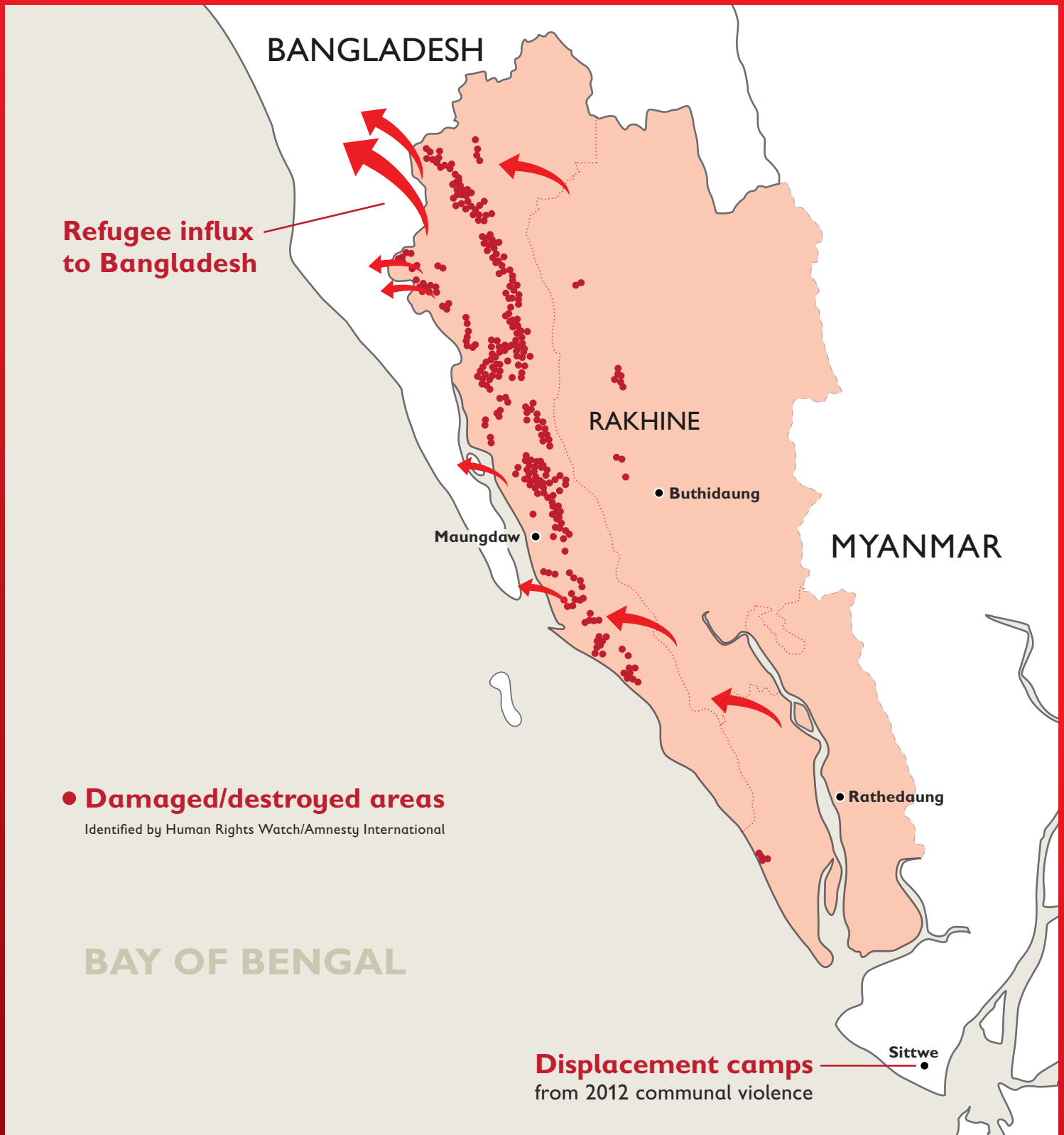
On 25 August, 1999, exactly 18 years before this latest wave of violence in Myanmar began, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1261, the first ever resolution on children and conflict. The resolution identified six violations against children that constitute the violations of children's rights with the greatest potential to impact them during times of conflict. These grave violations are: the killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access.

These violations are documented through a global UN-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, where accounts are verified and compiled, in an effort to document the grave violations and help push to hold perpetrators to account.

On the basis of this information, the United Nations Secretary-General names those who recruit, kill or maim children, commit sexual violence, abduct children and attack schools and hospitals in his annual report for engagement with the goal of ending these violations.

As an independent international child rights organisation, Save the Children regularly documents these grave violations against children in countries where it operates during times of conflict.

In the case of North Rakhine where international non-governmental organisations including Save the Children have been denied humanitarian access, these testimonies from Rohingya refugees who have fled into Bangladesh contribute to the growing body of evidence that grave violations have been committed against children.



Recommendations

PREVENT GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST ROHINGYA CHILDREN

Member states must do everything in their power to prevent further violations and protect Rohingya children. They must pull out all stops to compel the Government of Myanmar and the Myanmar military to act in the best interests of children by respecting their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law and hold the Government of Myanmar to account for violations:

- As individual states, they must utilise every possible diplomatic opportunity and all legal and financial means available to persuade the Government of Myanmar to prevent violations and ensure the protection of children.
- As members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), they must ensure the UNSC's Presidential Statement (S/PRST/2017/22) on the situation in Myanmar is implemented and the Government of Myanmar takes immediate steps to halt the violence, protect children and hold to account those who have committed grave violations against children. If the UNSC is of the view that there has been little improvement in the situation on receiving the UN Secretary-General's briefing in 30 days from the adoption of the Presidential Statement, it must champion a UNSC resolution framed in the strongest terms to compel action from the Government of Myanmar. As permanent UNSC members, they are reminded to refrain from using their veto power where it is clear crimes against humanity have occurred.
- As members of the UN General Assembly, they must support a strong resolution on Myanmar during its Third Committee, which denounces the situation and calls on the Government of Myanmar to take immediate steps to implement the actions outlined in the UNSC's Presidential Statement.
- As members of the Human Rights Council, they must support the holding of a special session on the situation in Myanmar and adopt a resolution denouncing grave violations committed against children and calling for full access for the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (FFM).

- As members of regional organisations, such as the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), they must also take a stand at the Asia–Europe (ASEM) Foreign Ministerial Meeting in Myanmar in November. At this meeting, states must collectively apply pressure on the Government of Myanmar to comply with its international obligations and make it clear that there will be political and economic costs if it continues to fail in its duty to protect.

BRING PERPETRATORS TO JUSTICE

These next key steps must now happen:

- The Government of Myanmar must provide full and unhindered access to independent observers, including UN Special Rapporteurs, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the FFM, and allow them to carry out their mandates and document any violation of the human rights of children.
- The Government of Myanmar must immediately begin a process to identify any persons who have committed crimes against persons and property in northern Rakhine State on or after 25 August 2017 and bring them to justice in line with national and international laws, or accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and request it carry out an investigation.
- If the Government of Myanmar fails to take credible and timely steps to investigate the crimes that have occurred and end impunity, the UNSC must act and refer the situation to the ICC.

ALLOW IMMEDIATE HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TO NORTHERN RAKHINE STATE

All humanitarian actors must be given full and unfettered access to northern Rakhine State to ensure that children in need are provided with lifesaving humanitarian assistance, their psychological recovery is supported and they can return to school when they are ready to do so.



A refugee camp in Cox's Bazar district. (Photo: Maria de la Guardia/Save the Children)

HELP ROHINGYA REFUGEES RETURN HOME WHEN IT IS SAFE TO DO SO

All Rohingya and other ethnic groups who have fled Rakhine State have the right to return to their place of origin or another location of their choosing and be supported to do so in a way that complies with international law, is safe, dignified, informed, voluntary and sustainable. The international community must make it clear to the Government of Myanmar that in order for this to be achieved:

- the Government of Myanmar must develop a robust and credible plan to facilitate a returns process that aligns with international standards as a matter of priority. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other relevant international organisations must be invited to participate in the development and implementation of this returns process to ensure compliance with international standards.
- the Government of Myanmar must also develop a clear and detailed plan to implement the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State's recommendations to address the root causes of the current Rakhine crisis and create an enabling environment for credible returns. This plan must be supported across all levels of government, including the military, and be swiftly implemented. In particular, through this plan, the Government of Myanmar must promote and protect human rights, without discrimination and regardless of ethnicity or religion, including by allowing freedom of movement, equal access to basic services and citizenship rights for all individuals.

HELP REBUILD SHATTERED YOUNG LIVES

Rohingya children have experienced severe distress as a result of their experiences. Many have suffered horrific violations and witnessed the loss of their loved ones. Those who have fled are now living in a desperate situation in Bangladesh and are vulnerable to new risks and abuses. All children who have been affected by the violence and remain in Rakhine State also need dedicated support:

- The Government of Myanmar must ensure that all children who have been affected by the violence and remain in Rakhine State receive psychological support and are protected. Humanitarian agencies must be allowed access to children in need to undertake assessments and provide services.
- The international community must ensure that all Rohingya children who have fled to Bangladesh are able to receive adequate care and support to help them to recover. Donors must fully fund the Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Plan and disburse funds swiftly to agencies on the ground who have the capacity to implement immediately. In particular it is critical that child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, gender-based violence and education activities are fully resourced.

“A soldier ripped a baby from his mother’s arms and threw him into the fire. His name was Sahab* and he was not even one year old.”

**Sahab*, male, under one year old, killed;
recounted by Rehema*, female, 24 years old**

“For the last two years, we have had to flee from one village to the next. The military kept telling us that we had no right to be in Myanmar.

“They wouldn’t let us pray. They wouldn’t let us travel to markets. If we tried they would beat us up.

“Then six weeks ago they came and took away 40 girls and women. We never saw them again.

“They have killed so many people and done such terrible things.

“I saw a soldier pour gasoline over a heavily pregnant woman. Then he set her on fire. Another soldier ripped a baby from his mother’s arms and threw him into the fire. His name was Sahab* and he was not even one year old.

“I will never forget their screams.”



A refugee camp in Cox's Bazar district.
(Photo: Bastian Strauch/Save the Children)

**“They told us to go in our house and stay there...
then they set our house on fire with us still in it.”**

Kabir*, male, nine years old and Hadi*, male, 11 years old, missing presumed dead; recounted by their father Hakim*, male, 41 years old

“When the military came to our village they told us to go in our house and stay there. If we didn’t comply, they said, they would beat us up.

“So I took my four children and wife inside. Then they set our house on fire with us still in it.

“We panicked and tried to get out of our house, but everything happened so quickly. I saw my six-year-old daughter’s skirt on fire, so I grabbed her and ran out of the house.

“My wife and 12-year-old son also made it out of our house, but we lost two of our children in the chaos.

“I still don’t know what happened to them. I fear that they didn’t make it out of the house in time and were burned alive.

“As people tried to run away the military attacked them with machetes. We all ran away as fast as we could.

“It took us 15 days to get to Bangladesh. The whole way my daughter was crying. She needs urgent medical attention. She has really bad burns on her upper legs and in her genital area. She is in so much pain.”

Rohingya refugees at a camp in Cox’s Bazar district.
(Photo: Maria de la Guardia/Save the Children)



“They hit me in the face with a gun, kicked me in my chest and stamped on my arms and legs. Then I was raped by three soldiers.”

Shadibabiran*, female, 16 years old

“The military came to our village. They started firing at people and my mother was shot in the ankle.

“Then they asked all of the adolescent girls to stand up and asked us where our parents were. I told them that my father died 15 years ago.

“They didn’t believe me and then some soldiers took me and two other girls into a house.

“They hit me in the face with a gun, kicked me in my chest and stamped on my arms and legs. Then I was raped by three soldiers. They raped me for about two hours and at some stage I fainted.

“They broke one of my ribs when they kicked me in the chest. It was very painful and I could hardly breathe. I still have difficulty breathing, but I haven’t been to a doctor, as I feel too ashamed.”

“They gang-raped her in front of the whole village... She was only 14 years old”

**Wafaa*, female, 14 years old, gang-raped;
recounted by Kushida*, female, 40 years old**

“When the military came to our village, two of the soldiers grabbed a teenage girl. Then they gang-raped her in front of the whole village.

“Those who tried to help her were beaten up by the other soldiers. Then they started firing at people, so we ran to a nearby village.

“Eventually the girl managed to run away and made it to the village where most of us had fled. She was in a very bad state.

“Her parents had been killed trying to help her. So I washed her and I tried to treat her injuries. She was only 14 years old and she was bleeding heavily. After four days she died.”

“When they weren’t raping me, they tied me up so I couldn’t run away. Because of their attacks I lost my baby”

**Basem*, male, 17 years old and unborn baby killed;
recounted by their mother Jahira*, female, 35 years old**

“Two months ago, six soldiers stormed my house and held me there for three days. They all raped me. I was unconscious on and off during the ordeal, so it could have been even more than six soldiers actually. Once I woke up when three soldiers were raping me simultaneously. They penetrated my vagina, my anus and my mouth at the same time. They were so brutal that I was bleeding out of my mouth and I lost a tooth.

“When they weren’t raping me, they tied me up so I couldn’t run away. They hit me in the face and on my legs with the ends of their rifles. They bit me on my arms and hands. I still have the marks and I don’t have feeling in my hands any more.

“The worse moment was when one of the soldiers bit off one of my nipples. It was so painful that I passed out.

“After three long days they finally left. I was eight months pregnant at the time. Because of their attacks I lost my baby. My husband came for me and carried me to safety. I was unconscious, so I can’t remember getting to Bangladesh. I didn’t wake up until I was in hospital here in Bangladesh.

“My husband told me that the soldiers killed my oldest son. He was trying to protect me from them so they shot him. He was only 17 years old.

“I have lost everything: my son, my unborn baby, and my dignity.”



“Sometimes they took young girls away to the barracks. 15-, 16-year-olds. Some came back and some didn’t. One who came back was upset. She told us she had been raped many times.”

Hamid*, male, 17 years old

“The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) came to my village the day before they attacked the police posts. They told everyone to hand over their knives and sticks to them. They told me that I must help them and that I should go to the next village and plant mines to blow up the police. I said I didn’t want to and I was beaten by several men with big sticks in our paddy field. When they finished I was very hurt and I just lay there on the ground with my eyes closed. Some of my friends didn’t want to get beaten so they went with them.

“From the ground, I could hear them collecting everyone in the village who had worked with the government. They were shouting that they were traitors and then I saw them being killed. They slaughtered them all with machetes and put their bodies in a hole.

“A few hours later, at midnight, they attacked the police posts. And almost straight away the police and army attacked them back. The fighters ran back into the village and they were chased by the army. There was lots of shooting and then a big explosion. I ran into the jungle and when I looked back I could see the village was on fire.

“I was separated from my family. Someone told me they saw my father shot in the back as he tried to run. When we went back to the village I found his body.

“When I got back I saw that not all of the village had burned down and our house was still standing. So we decided to stay as we had no where else to go. But after a few weeks the military came back. They demanded money and then eventually one day we had nothing left to give. So they told us to get out of our house and then they burned it down.

“Some people are still staying there. They still have money and things to pay with. Sometimes it is not always money. Sometimes they took young girls away to the barracks. 15-, 16-year-olds. Some came back and some didn’t. One who came back was upset. She told us she had been raped many times.

“Before the attacks we had all learned together, we lived together, we traded together. Things were difficult, we couldn’t travel without special permission but it wasn’t as bad as it is now.

“I lost all the hope I had in Myanmar. Now I will just try to survive here. Both sides are responsible for our misery. I want those responsible to be punished for what they have done. I want them to go on trial. Until they are I don’t think I will ever want to go back.”

**“The military came to our village
and took away all the young men.
Some of them were only 14 years old.”**

**Hatim*, male, 17 years old, ‘disappeared’;
recounted by his mother Seniora*, female, 35 years old**

“I have been heartbroken for so long. Three years ago the military came to our village and took my son and some of the other men away. He was only 17. I don’t know why they took him, he had done nothing wrong. Every day I hoped he would come back. But we have not seen or heard from him since.

“Then the attacks on the police posts happened and everything was destroyed. After the attacks the military came to our village and took away all the young men. Some of them were only 14 years old. They took my husband from me and left me alone to look after my five daughters. Like my son I don’t know if I will ever see him again.

“Then the military came back again. But this time they arrived at night and there was gunfire. Houses caught fire and everyone tried to run away. Our house was burned down. My nephew was trapped in his house. When we went back the next day you could see what was left of his body. It was like charcoal. You could smell the burning bodies for a long way after we had left.

“It took us 15 days to reach the border from our village. We had nothing to bring as it had all been destroyed. We travelled the whole way on foot and were very tired. There was nothing to eat. Just the leaves of plants and some raw vegetables we found on the way. The journey was so hard and we suffered a lot.

“When we got to the border we had to cross the river by boat. It was very busy and my group got split up. I held onto my two youngest children but the older three were put on another boat. They were 10, 11 and 12 years old.

“When we landed here I could not find them. I asked everyone if they had seen them. Then someone told me that the boat they were in had capsized. No one has found their bodies. Now I’m heartbroken again.

“I am here with just my two daughters left. We don’t know where we will go or how long we will be here. I want to go back to where our village was one day if it is safe. I hope that if we go back I will find my husband and son again.”

“I could see the military burning down the entire village and killing people.”

Roshida*, female, 16 years old

“The military came to our village and started setting houses on fire. I was in the kitchen at the time when I suddenly heard shooting and began to smell smoke.

“I fled into the jungle to hide. From there, I could see the military burning down the entire village and killing people.

“They killed many. They were shooting and stabbing them. I could see everything and I was very scared that they would find us and kill us too.

“Luckily my family survived. We decided to flee to Bangladesh for safety.

“We didn’t even have time to gather our belongings and just fled with the clothes on our bodies.

“It took us three days to reach the border. We walked the whole way, even throughout the night.

“We only had leaves from the jungle to eat along the way. I saw three people die on the walk. We were all exhausted.

“There was no water and we were starving. In order to survive, we had no choice but to continue our journey and leave the bodies lying there in the mud.

“I feel safe in Bangladesh, but I miss my home in Myanmar. There is nothing to do here. I don’t have any friends. At night, we all sleep on a plastic sheet, which is very cold, especially when it rains. I have become ill because of that. Life here is hard and I have a lot of nightmares about what I saw the day we left our village.

“I really want to return to my home in Myanmar. I wish there was peace in my country and that we had proper citizenship. That way we could return home again.”

“Without any warning they shot both of my parents in front of my eyes.”

Nor*, male, 16 years old

“When the military came to my village, they told us we had to leave Myanmar. They said we don’t belong there.

“They took away our cows and water buffaloes and then they set our village on fire.

“Without any warning they shot both of my parents in front of my eyes.

“I grabbed my younger siblings and we ran away. My sisters are seven and 12 and my brother is 10.

“Now we are orphans. My siblings are always crying for their parents. They don’t understand that they will never see them again.

“We are staying with our uncle but they are scared that the military will come here and kill him too. He is all we have left now.

“I try to be strong for them as I am the oldest. When we arrived in Bangladesh we knew we were safe now.”



Rohingya refugees at a camp in Cox's Bazar district.
(Photo: Bastian Strauch/Save the Children)

“It has been over a month from the attack and my 10-year-old daughter hasn’t said a word since.”

**Solima*, female, 10 years old, deeply traumatised;
recounted by father Aashir*, male, 38 years old**

“The military burned our house down and took away all of our cows. They were firing their guns and we were so scared that they would kill us.

“It has been over a month from the attack and my 10-year-old daughter hasn’t said a word since. She is still so upset by what happened to us. I am really worried about her.”

“I am the only one left here now.”

Rahimol*, male, 10 years old

“About six weeks ago the military attacked the village my family lived in. My father was shot dead in front of my eyes. He died immediately.

“I started running away with my neighbours and my older brother. I don’t know what happened to my mother.

“We walked barefoot for four days and my feet were covered in cuts. We didn’t have any food or water and at times I had to crawl, because I was so weak.

“When we crossed into Bangladesh, the border was full of people and I lost my brother in the chaos.

“The police took me to one of the refugee camps and I now live here (Save the Children’s Child Safe Space). There used to be eight children here, but all the other children have been reunited with their families.

“I am the only one left here now. I feel very lonely and I really miss my brother. I wish he was here with me.”

“Right now if anyone goes back we are worried that it will just happen again... Please help us. We beg you. We just want to live in peace.”

Halima*, female, 15 years old

“I have no parents any more, only my older sister. The military surrounded our village and then they opened fire. It was nighttime. We were all so scared. We all ran in different directions completely empty-handed. Now we are here. Just me and my older sister. Our parents are missing. I don't think they are alive. We have nobody and nothing here.

“All of this happened because some Muslims attacked the Buddhists. Because of some few people the whole of our population is suffering. Everything back there is either destroyed or closed. Our mosques, madrassas are all gone.

“After our village was destroyed we moved to another where we stayed for 12 days. But then we ran out of supplies and so were forced to come here.

“Even before this I was scared to come across the military. Girls were taken away, so I would stay within the boundaries of our house. If you heard gunfire you knew they were close by. So I would hide in my house and keep quiet until they had gone.

“If there is safety I would like to go back. It is our homeland. We were born there. If you can assure us it is safe we would all go back, I am certain.

“What can we do against the government? They have weapons, they have power. We have nothing. Maybe one day we will get peace.

“Right now if anyone goes back we are worried that it will just happen again. We want to live our lives in peace. We want to be free from fear. Please help us. We beg you. We just want to live in peace.”



Refugee camp, Bangladesh. (Photo: Bastian Strauch/Save the Children)

Every child has the right to a future. Save the Children works around the world to give children a healthy start in life, and the chance to learn and to be safe. We do whatever it takes to get children the things they need – every day and in times of crisis.



Hasina Begum* and her one-year-old son Tofayel* fled Myanmar when their village was attacked and are now living in a camp in Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh. (Photo: GMB Akash/Panos Pictures/Save the Children)

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