

# World's largest refugee settlement needs help



The Kutupalong refugee settlement. This photo was taken in 2017, some months after the Rohingya first fled to Bangladesh. [Photo: DFID]

## *NURUDIN SADALI finds out what it is like there.*

Kutupalong is located in an area in Bangladesh known as Cox's Bazar District. It covers 13 square kilometres, the same size as Changi Airport. However, it houses close to a million Rohingya refugees. In 2018, Kutupalong earned its title as the largest refugee settlement in the world. Can you imagine squeezing that many people in such a small space?

## ***Who lives in Kutupalong?***

The Rohingya make up almost the entire refugee population in Kutupalong. They are the largest Muslim group in Myanmar, where Buddhists are the majority. Despite living in Myanmar for generations, the Rohingya have long been discriminated against by their own government — it is hard for them to find work or get an education, and they do not have much freedom.

In 2017, the Myanmar military and local Buddhist extremists launched attacks on the Rohingya. Thousands of Rohingya lost their lives and their villages were destroyed. To escape this **persecution**, hundreds of thousands fled to Kutupalong in Bangladesh which is next to Myanmar.

As refugees, the Rohingya are not allowed to work and have had to rely on the kindness of the locals as well as aid agencies like the United Nations (UN) and World Food Program (WFP).

The Rohingya refugees are not the only ones living in Cox's Bazar. There are also hundreds of thousands of local Bangladeshis, too. The Bangladeshi community has largely welcomed the Rohingya into their country. They have shared their resources and extended help to these displaced people.

## ***The living conditions there***

Many of the structures in Kutupalong are **haphazardly** built shelters. They are built with materials given by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as well as whatever else the refugees manage to find. Many end up chopping down nearby forests, despite some of these areas being protected nature reserves. This has resulted in a number of environmental problems.

Many of the shelters are fragile and dangerous. Rahima, a 25-year-old refugee explained how “whenever it rained, the floor got very wet and turned to mud”. She added how the living conditions “made (her) children sick.” Unfortunately, Rahima’s experience is not uncommon.

This year, she was lucky enough to be selected by the UNHCR to receive a new specially-built shelter. Since they got involved at Kutupalong, the UNHCR has helped to build and repair more than 91,000 shelters.

The UNHCR has also put in a lot of effort to ensure that there are medical facilities for the Rohingya. This is in stark contrast with what the Rohingya had back home in Myanmar. Because they were seen as “different”, they were discriminated against. It was near impossible for them to get medical treatment then. To use public health services, they often had to pay bribes, and most Rohingya could not afford to do so.



At a primary healthcare centre in Kutupalong, Madam Rajuma holds her newborn daughter under the watchful eye of a nurse. Madam Rajuma had been rushed to the centre in the middle of the night when her baby was about to be born. “I was in pain, but I didn’t feel scared because I saw all the machines, and the doctors and midwives seemed very well trained,” Madam Rajuma said. The United Nations (UN) works with the Bangladeshi government to provide essential health care to the Rohingya. [Photo: © UNHCR/Iffath Yeasmine ]

In Kutupalong, there are hospitals and clinics open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. These hospitals have sufficient equipment and trained staff. It is not difficult for sick people to receive treatment. However, there is still much room for improvement. As it stands, there are only about 300 hospital beds available in the entire settlement. In today’s situation where a pandemic is running **rampant**, a COVID-19 outbreak in Kutupalong would undoubtedly cripple the entire camp.

## ***Hardships from the monsoon and elephants***

Bangladesh experiences an annual monsoon season between May to October. During this period, flash floods and mudslides are common. In July 2019, more than 5,000 people lost their homes as a result of the monsoon.

The deforestation in the area around Kutupalong has also had a negative environmental impact. Where many trees were chopped down for shelters and wood for cooking stoves, the ground is left unprotected. In such areas, deadly landslides are more likely to occur. This has also led to some tension between the Rohingya and the locals who are unhappy about the deforestation.

Also, some of the forested areas are part of a route that elephants use every year when they migrate. Several refugees have been **trampled** by the elephants when they encroached into these routes.

## *Volunteering for the community*



*Rohingya workmen carry building material to help construct new facilities for their community in Kutupalong. Oscar Sanchez Pineiro of UNHCR, says, “We’re putting refugees at the centre of the response, to deliver services, upgrade shelters, and improve infrastructure.” [Photo: © UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo]*

A number of the Rohingya volunteer their services to help their community. These volunteers are an important part of the community. Because they are displaced people themselves, it is easier for them to act as a bridge between their community and the many different aid agencies.

Some volunteer as health workers. They go house-to-house to educate their community about nutrition and health issues. Others are trained in how to respond in emergencies. They work closely with their community and help raise awareness about the potential dangers of the monsoon season.

One such volunteer is 20-year-old Mohammed Halim, who came with his family to Kutupalong in 2017. He typically spends eight hours a day walking through the settlement to check on his neighbours. He describes how proud he is to support his community, adding, “we were once strangers, and now we live as friends.”

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### VOCAB BUILDER

**persecution** (say “**pe-se-kiu-shen**”; noun) = hostility and mistreatment due to differences in, for instance, race, religion or beliefs.

**haphazardly** (say “**hap-ha-zed-lee**”; adverb) = without proper organisation.

**rampant** (say “**ram-pent**”; adjective) = spreading out of control.

**trampled** (say “**tram-pl’d**”; verb) = stepped on and crushed.