



Nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees are living in camps in Bangladesh.

Edited by Jennifer Sills

Rohingya refugees and the environment

Violence in the Rakhine State of Myanmar has led to a humanitarian crisis as Rohingya people flee across the border to Bangladesh (1). With the rapid influx of nearly 700,000 arrivals between August 2017 and the beginning of 2018, the Bangladeshi city of Cox's Bazar is now under severe strain from a Rohingya population of almost 1 million, one of the largest concentrations of refugees in the world (2). The crisis seized global attention, and the international response was rapidly escalated to a Level 3 emergency (3).

In addition to the humanitarian challenges, the mass influx of Rohingya refugees has resulted in environmental degradation both within the refugee camps and in the surrounding areas (2). The expansion of existing campsites has led to more than 2000 ha of forest loss in the Cox's Bazar region (4). Expansion of the old Kutupalong camp blocked the only corridor used by the globally endangered Asian elephant as a migration route and trapped about 45 elephants in the western side of the camp (5). The latest Rohingya settlement has also amplified human-elephant conflict in the area, with 13 human casualties so far (6). The remaining elephant habitat is under severe pressure from uncontrolled fuelwood collection in the forest (7). The pressure on forests has caused tensions with local

host communities, which rely on these forests for fuelwood, medicine, and food (8). The surrounding critical biodiversity areas, such as the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary, Himchari National Park, and Inani National Park, are also at risk (2). Soil erosion and landslides are already common in the area, affecting water resources, irrigation, and groundwater reserves (9). Local biodiversity, including marine resources, acoustic environment, and air quality, is being degraded at an unprecedented rate (2).

Repatriation is under negotiation, but it is likely that the Rohingya refugees will remain in Bangladesh for some time (10). The situation demands development of a long-term strategy at the landscape level not only to address humanitarian needs but also to mitigate both short- and long-term environmental effects. A forest and landscape restoration approach (11) will provide ample opportunities to integrate environmental and humanitarian interventions, both inside and outside the refugee camps. For instance, establishing fuelwood plantations to meet the local demand will reduce pressure on nearby forests. In addition, refugees and local host communities can use native species seedlings to plant trees, facilitating reforestation of degraded lands.

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