



Bangladesh: Rohingya cannot be pressured or forced into repatriation to Burma

London, November 14, 2018 -- Burma Human Rights Network is calling on the Government of Bangladesh to postpone plans to repatriate Rohingya refugees back to Burma until conditions are acceptable to do so. Bangladesh and Burma have agreed to begin repatriating at least 2,000 Rohingya back to Burma starting November 15th, despite a lack of assurance for the rights and safety of those being returned. Interviews conducted by Burma Human Rights Network with refugees who have been told they are among those who will be returned have shown a pattern of disregard for the safety and concern of the refugees listed for repatriation. All of the refugees BHRN spoke to said they were not asked if they wanted to return and said they felt they would be in danger if they refused.

“The Government of Bangladesh must cease efforts to prematurely return Rohingya refugees to Burma and instead should be working with the international community and the Rohingya themselves to establish ways in which the Rohingya can be returned to Burma with their safety and human rights guaranteed. Currently, those responsible for the repatriation appear to be using pressure to force the Rohingya to return to a place they rightfully fear to be persecuted and even killed,” said BHRN’s Executive Director, Kyaw Win.



Figure 1: Kutupalong refugee camp November 13th 2018. BHRN/Maung Maung Soe.

BHRN spoke to Rohingya refugees who said they were informed that they were among those chosen to be repatriated to Burma. For their safety, in both Bangladesh and Burma, their identities are being withheld.

All of those interviewed said they were not asked if they wanted to return, and believed they would be forced to do so despite their strong objections. As a result, three of the men interviewed said they and their families were in hiding. A 50-year-old Rohingya man scheduled for repatriation told BHRN, “We have no choice but to go [back to Burma]. We were on the list and they just told us like that. We don’t go to our shelters at night. We are hiding so no one knows where we are.”

All of the Rohingya refugees interviewed by BHRN said they were told that they and their families were chosen for repatriation. Two of the men said they were told they were to return after November 15, while two others said they were never given a date or time for when they were to return but that they were told to be prepared because they were on the list of those chosen for repatriation. They all said that they were told by their refugee camp’s Camp-in-Charge and two of them said they were also informed by and pressured by members of the military.

Successful and ethical repatriation must be voluntary, but these efforts do not appear to seek the consent of those scheduled for repatriation. The refugees chosen for repatriation interviewed by BHRN said they were not asked if they wanted to return and they were never asked about their concerns. Those who have been chosen for repatriation expressed strong resistance to return but fear they will be forced to go regardless. A 43-year-old Rohingya man scheduled to be repatriated told BHRN, “We have no desire to go back to Myanmar (Burma). How can we go back? Here, people are trying to commit suicide if they have to go. If we have to go we will commit suicide.” A 50-year-old man scheduled for return said, “We want justice if we are to go back to Myanmar. We want a UN peacekeeping force to protect us. If we are forced to go we will commit suicide. We will take poison and die here so we won’t have to go.”



Figure 2: Kutupalong refugee camp November 13th 2018. BHRN/Maung Maung Soe.

Threats of suicide appear to be common, and refugees have reported to BHRN that some have already attempted to kill themselves as a result of being notified they would have to return to Burma.

All of the refugees scheduled for repatriation interviewed by BHRN said they came to Bangladesh after the Burmese Military campaign against the Rohingya in 2017 and all of them said they had

family members killed by the military during that campaign. One of the men interviewed by BHRN said, “My home [in Burma] was near a military base. They shot at us and for so long. My nephew was killed then. He was burnt alive [by the military] in front of me.”

A major issue for those facing repatriation is that returnees will be kept in “temporary shelters” where they will have no freedom of movement and limited access to work, aid, and medical care. These camps will function as open-air prisons with no credible timeframe for how long returnees will be kept. Those who are returned will be forced to accept National Verification Cards (NVC) which will register them as ‘Bengalis’ and will effectively deny their citizenship claims and their ability to self-identify their ethnicity and indigenous status in Rakhine State.

All of those interviewed by BHRN said that their original villages were burnt down and they believed they would be resettled in IDP (Internally Displaced Person) Camps. One of the men interviewed by BHRN said when he was informed he was going to return to Burma it was in a formal meeting on November 7th which was attended by a delegation from Burma, including a member of Burma’s ruling party, the National League for Democracy. “In Bangladesh, a delegation came. They showed us pictures of the camp and said you will stay here for six or seven months. They said it is a temporary shelter,” he told BHRN.

In 2012, over 140,000 Rohingya were forced into IDP camps following anti-Muslim riots throughout Rakhine State. Although these camps were also said to be temporary, the majority of these IDPs remain trapped inside of the camps which they can not leave without special permission. Additionally, The Kofi Annan led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State included the closure of these camps as part of the recommendations of their August 2017 final report. The Burmese Government has claimed to have taken steps to implement the recommendations of this report, but are clearly failing to do so, raising serious concerns regarding how they would treat any new returnees.

Radio Free Asia reported on 8th November that the initial list for repatriation was composed of 8,000 Rohingya chosen by the Bangladeshi Government. After reviewing the list, Burmese authorities accepted 2,000 individuals from the list to be repatriated. In the same report, RFA quoted Soe Han, Director General of the ASEAN Affairs Department at Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as saying there were 54 individuals ‘involved in terrorism’ on the list. He did not offer specifics or evidence but said, “If they are sent back to Myanmar, we have to take action against them according to the law.” This is of particular concern, as BHRN has documented several instances of Rohingya being arbitrarily accused of connections to militant groups.

A 48-year-old man scheduled for return interviewed by BHRN said, “Burma hasn’t changed. If we go back they will start killing again. What they did before they are still doing. We are worried about that.”

Another of the refugees repeated this sentiment, “We don’t want to go back because there is still a genocide. The Burmese military has said that we are a terrorist group. They will kill us. That is why we can’t go there. We want assurance of rights and justice. We want a peacekeeping force.”

The Rohingya interviewed for this release all stated that they needed their human rights and safety guaranteed before they could return. Three of them said they wanted UN peacekeepers in place in Rakhine State in order for them to feel safe. One man said if he was given Burmese citizenship, a right stripped from the Rohingya by the 1982 Citizenship Law, he would feel safer returning.



Figure 3: Kutupalong refugee camp November 13th 2018. BHRN/Maung Maung Soe.

On November 13th the UN Human Rights Chief, Michelle Bachelet, issued a statement calling for Burma to halt repatriation efforts, saying such a move would endanger the lives of those returning. The chair of the UN fact-finding mission on Myanmar, Marzuki Darusman, referred to the situation of Rohingya still living in Burma as an “ongoing genocide” on October 24th, 2018.

The Rohingya in Bangladesh are survivors of genocide and are severely traumatized by the events they escaped. They are witnesses to the most heinous and gruesome atrocities and they require adequate time and effort to address their needs and concerns. It is unreasonable and immoral to expect them to return to Burma without assurances of safety, dignity, and protection.

“Bangladesh must cease any plans to repatriate the Rohingya back to Burma. Sending the Rohingya back without a plan that consults the Rohingya is not only unethical but will likely result in creating a situation where the Rohingya again flee to Bangladesh if they are attacked or persecuted. The problems in Burma are not likely to be resolved quickly, and Bangladesh should play a role in ensuring the long-term safety and dignity of the Rohingya in order to help stop the cycle of state violence and mass displacement of the Rohingya population which has repeatedly had negative impact on Bangladesh as well,” said Kyaw Win.

Organisation’s Background

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) is based in London, operates across Burma and works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

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