



Bangladesh: End Restrictions on Rohingya Refugees, Investigate Abuses

New Rohingya-led research reveals extreme levels of extortion, violence, and theft by Bangladesh police

(September 22, 2023)— The Bangladesh government should investigate police abuse and extortion and lift restrictions on the Rohingya refugee movement, the Youth Congress Rohingya (YCR) said in a new report published today.

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, who survived and fled genocidal violence in Myanmar, are now experiencing severe abuses in Bangladesh—the country where they sought refuge, according to data in a new report published today by YCR, a Rohingya refugee-led youth advocacy organization. The report details prison-like conditions for Rohingya, who are prohibited from leaving the refugee camps, which are surrounded by barbed wire fences, checkpoints, and watchtowers.

“Hardships have increased immensely for Rohingya in the camps in southern Bangladesh,” said one anonymous YCR member and researcher. *“There has been no accountability from either the Government of Bangladesh or the international community for the deteriorating conditions. Because of the lack of accountability in Bangladesh, we the Rohingya community, are using this research to create accountability, by presenting the reality with the hope that there will be significant and necessary changes to improve conditions in the camps.”*

While initially welcoming Rohingya refugees, the Government of Bangladesh has been steadily tightening restrictions over the last six years that Rohingya have sought refuge in Bangladesh. These have escalated to the point where the majority of Rohingya surveyed in this study believed that conditions in the camps are worse than the conditions they faced prior to fleeing Myanmar.

“THIS PERSECUTION IS THE WORST THERE IS.”

Restrictions on Rohingya
Freedom of Movement in
Bangladesh

Youth Congress Rohingya
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The 88-page report, *“This Persecution Is The Worst There Is: Restrictions on Rohingya Freedom of Movement in Bangladesh,”* is based on Rohingya-led participatory action research conducted by a YCR between August 2022 and August 2023 by a team of 14 ethnic-Rohingya researchers. The report demonstrates the severe toll that government-imposed movement restrictions and abuses by the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) have on Rohingya refugee life.

YCR documented several restrictions on Rohingya movement underpinned by government policies. Current restrictive policies include:

- 1) a prohibition on leaving the camps or, at times, traveling within camps without official authorization,
- 2) a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., during which Rohingya are not permitted to be outside of their shelters,
- 3) a ban on vehicles entering the camps, ‘
- 4) prohibitions on assembling in groups, and
- 5) a prohibition against Rohingya owning or using smartphones and laptops.

APBn officers interviewed by YCR confirmed that the majority of restrictions reported by Rohingya refugees are based on official government policies or orders.

The Government of Bangladesh has claimed that these measures are in place to protect Rohingya: to crack down on crime, reduce radicalization, and violence. However, they have had the opposite effect. The camps are becoming increasingly unsafe due to violence by both armed groups and the APBn.



Sixty-five percent of Rohingya survey respondents believed their current situation in Bangladesh is as bad, if not worse, than their treatment in Myanmar. Most Rohingya reported that they believed the government justifications for restrictions were disingenuous, and that the true reason for these restrictions is to weaken the Rohingya community and coerce them to repatriate to Myanmar. Rohingya refugees believe that the current restrictions on movement, although framed as protection, are instead creating the same oppressive environment from which they fled.

“In Myanmar, we were kept underprivileged by the government,” said Safika (pseudonym), a 35-year-old Rohingya woman. She continued:

“Our children didn’t have a chance to study. We weren’t allowed to have income sources, neither did we have freedom of movement, and we couldn’t live there peacefully. We are going through the same discrimination and violence here as well. Our children are not allowed to study. We aren’t allowed to do any business or have income sources. If innocent people sit together to chat with one another, the police accuse them of being criminals, and they are imprisoned after being

tortured. I think the government has imposed these restrictions and violence to make our life so miserable that we return to our country the same way we fled here.”

Restrictions on movement are central to enforcing other restrictions such as on education and work. The vast majority of Rohingya surveyed in the study reported that movement restrictions had severe impacts on their safety, health, livelihoods, education, cultural practices, and the ability to access food and essentials.

SURVEY RESPONSES: IMPACT OF MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS

THE REPORTED LEVELS OF IMPACT OF MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS ON...	HIGH IMPACT FROM RESTRICTIONS (% OF RESPONDENTS)	LOW IMPACT FROM RESTRICTIONS (% OF RESPONDENTS)	NO IMPACT FROM RESTRICTIONS (% OF RESPONDENTS)
...EXPERIENCING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS	93.7%	5.8%	0.4%
...ABILITY TO EXPRESS OPINIONS OPENLY AND PUBLICLY	89.2%	6.6%	4.1%
...ABILITY TO ACCESS HEALTHCARE	83.4%	10.4%	6.2%
...ABILITY TO ACCESS WORK OR LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES	82.6%	10.4%	7.1%
...ELEVATING THE RISK OF DISEASES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES	82.5%	10.0%	7.5%
...ABILITY TO MEET FAMILY AND FRIENDS	81.3%	14.1%	4.6%
...ABILITY TO MEET DAILY CONSUMPTION NEEDS	71.2%	18.8%	10.0%
...ABILITY TO PARTICIPATE IN CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND PRACTICES	69.7%	25.7%	4.6%
...ABILITY TO ACCESS EDUCATION	62.2%	22.8%	14.9%
...ABILITY TO PRACTISE RELIGION	48.1%	36.1%	15.8%
...ABILITY TO ACCESS WATER AND SANITATION	31.1%	41.9%	27.0%

The government movement restrictions are violently enforced by both the physical infrastructure put in place by the government authorities and through intimidation and physical and sexual abuse by the APBn. Fencing constructed around the camps prevents people from moving freely, forcing them to pass through checkpoints where they are at the mercy of the APBn officers who enforce movement restrictions on a seemingly arbitrary basis.

Checkpoints have become places of routine violence where Rohingya experience physical and sexual abuse from the APBn and confiscation of food, money, and mobile phones are routine. APBn officers interviewed for the study largely confirmed the widespread existence of these practices.

Extortion and other forms of corruption by the APBn and other authorities are commonplace in the camps. APBn officers will often fabricate evidence to justify further extortion.

Bribes must also be paid to accomplish many aspects of basic functioning in the camps, including crossing checkpoints, working, transporting necessities, seeking healthcare, carrying a mobile phone, holding weddings or funerals, and participating in religious life.

These claims have been corroborated by APBn officers: although they report that practices of extortion are not taught as official policy, extortion is widespread and has, at times, been ordered by senior officers. Among Rohingya, many share the sentiment that police are in the camps to make money, not for their protection.

“I have not taken money directly from the Rohingya, said APBn officer Hossain (pseudonym). “Sometimes my colleagues take money from them, and they give me some of it, or we spend that money on snacks and coffee costs.”



In addition to violence and extortion, the threat of forced relocation to Bhasan Char Island is increasingly being used to further deter Rohingya from violating movement restrictions. Finally, the Rohingya also endure routine forced labour at the hands of the APBn, being forced to serve as night guards as they had previously experienced in Myanmar. It was noted by respondents that conditions were not like this when the army was in control of the camp.

The results of the study suggest that Rohingya are experiencing mass arbitrary detention by the Bangladesh government, a clear violation of international human rights law and standards.

Study results showed that women are more likely than men to experience sexual or gender based violence perpetrated by the police at checkpoints, and cannot evade checkpoints as easily (e.g., crawling under or climbing over the fences) due to reasons such as pregnancy, childcare, or not being physically strong enough. For women, experiences of sexual or gender-based violence often cause great shame and can result in social consequences, such as losing the ability to marry. Restrictions on movement have also exacerbated intimate partner violence among Rohingya. Many women have connected the repressive environment and distress their husbands experience from being unable to work with the increased domestic violence towards them and their children.



Government-imposed restrictions in the camps have caused severe humiliation and dehumanisation. Rohingya respondents described being treated worse than animals. This has severely impacted the mental health of the population. Suicidal ideation is common and many have expressed that death would be a more humane option than what they are currently enduring. There is a pervasive loss of hope for the future, as many fear the effects of an entire generation growing up illiterate, without education, and without opportunity.

Fatima (pseudonym), a 35-year-old Rohingya woman, said: *“They said that these restrictions are in place because we are provided with rations and we don’t need to move [outside the camps] or make money for ourselves. I think the purpose of the restrictions is to force us to commit suicide and die here.”*



The report makes 39 detailed recommendations to the Governments of Bangladesh, the international community, and humanitarian organisations aimed at improving conditions for Rohingya in the camps.

In addition to the important results, this study also demonstrates that Rohingya-led initiatives can and do produce rigorous, high-quality research. As the affected population, Rohingya refugees themselves are best placed to not only conduct this research within their community but also to present policy recommendations to change their circumstances. In fact, due to the current restrictions, this study would not have been possible without Rohingya leadership, emphasising the need for continued efforts towards full refugee representation and participatory inclusion in humanitarian response. The central role of Rohingya voices in this study points to the increasing need to decolonize humanitarian aid processes by supporting, funding, and facilitating refugee leadership.

For more information, please contact:

For security reasons YCR members are not able to publicly comment because of well-founded fears of reprisals. YCR would like all correspondence related to this report to be directed to Andrew Riley and Haley Ritsema, who advised on the report.

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