



**Joint Humanitarian INGO Statement: Sustaining Support for the Rohingya Refugee Response  
22 October 2020**

Over three years since violence in Myanmar forced more than 700,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh, refugees continue to wait for safe, dignified, and voluntary return to their homeland. In Myanmar, approximately 600,000 Rohingya remain, including 130,000 confined to camps in central Rakhine state, where they are denied freedom of movement, their right to citizenship, and access to essential humanitarian services. Across the region, humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) face myriad challenges in meeting the Rohingya’s life-saving needs. At times and in some locations, such challenges are unnecessarily imposed.

Through this joint statement, the NGO community highlights priority areas for collective action and recommendations for the international community and national actors in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) hosting contexts in the region. We collectively have an obligation to support the Rohingya now so they can start to safely—and dignifiedly—rebuild their lives in a manner that ensures full enjoyment of fundamental human rights.

***PRIORITY ISSUES AND BACKGROUND***

**Ongoing Human Rights Crisis in Myanmar**

In Myanmar, the escalation of conflict between the Myanmar Armed Forces and the Arakan Army since December 2018 has forcibly displaced over 90,000 Rakhine (also known as ‘Arakanese’) and other ethnic groups, killed and maimed civilians, and damaged critical infrastructure. The continued reliance on ‘clearance operations’ criticized in the U.N. Fact-Finding Mission report has resulted in indiscriminate targeting of civilians, including those least able to flee the impacts of conflict such as children, older people, pregnant women, and people with disabilities. In recent weeks, conflict has intensified in Rathedaung and Myebon townships, causing more gender-based violence incidents, injuries, and deaths—including of women and children. With movement restrictions in place, Rohingya and other conflict-affected communities are caught in the crossfire and cannot access healthcare and other life-saving humanitarian assistance. The use of explosive weapons by conflict parties—accompanied by evidence of recent landmine use and the threat of unexploded ordinances—further hinders IDPs’ return

For more than eight years, 130,000 internally displaced Rohingya and Kaman communities in central Rakhine have been confined to camps. They now face the risk of permanent encampment and segregation as the construction of permanent camp-like housing moves forward without the consent of, or meaningful consultations with, affected communities. No concrete action has been taken to lift movement restrictions that would enable communities to rebuild their lives.

Following a surge in confirmed COVID-19 cases in August, preventative measures have been implemented and enforced inconsistently, with marginalized communities such as the Rohingya facing harsher punishment and extortion with the enforcement of such measures. Coupled with pre-existing movement restrictions, marginalized communities are having greater difficulties accessing healthcare and essential services. There have also been blanket restrictions on humanitarian operations that negatively impact communities' health and well-being in Rakhine State.

Internet restrictions on 3G and 4G connectivity remain across seven townships in Rakhine State. The current 2G connection restricts basic access to email and websites, preventing communities from accessing vital information on the conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic. It also obstructs humanitarian and government actors from effectively delivering risk messages and critical services remotely, particularly in the COVID-19 context, when their access to affected communities is severely restricted due to measures in place to slow down transmission.

The Government of Myanmar continues to promote the National Verification Card (NVC) process, including through coercive measures, which does not offer a reliable pathway to the enjoyment of basic rights or full citizenship and, in some cases, erases Rohingya identity by forcing them to identify as 'Bengali.' Political disenfranchisement of Rohingya continues to expand ahead of Myanmar's national elections in November 2020, with Rohingya candidates barred from running for office and most Rohingya, both inside and outside the country, without access to the required documentation to vote.

### **Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, more than 860,000 Rohingya refugees live in 34 congested camps in conditions of deprivation, facing significant protection risks including generalized, targeted, and gender-based violence, child labor, human trafficking, and increased risk of COVID-19 infection. The economic, protection, and environmental impact of the crisis has also had severe consequences for host communities. Multi-sectoral health and hygiene support is being delivered by humanitarian actors and Rohingya themselves, for both Bangladeshi and Rohingya communities. However, it faces a severe lack of funding in 2021.

The reduction in humanitarian presence to combat the spread of COVID-19 drastically reduced refugee access to protection services—including support to survivors of gender-based violence—as well as education and livelihoods, which were already highly constrained before the pandemic. While some COVID-19 movement restrictions have been lifted for humanitarians, which is very welcome, we have also seen the beginnings of a degrading food security situation in the camps. Without action now, such food insecurity could increase malnutrition and human suffering.

Since May 2020, 306 Rohingya refugees rescued at sea, including several women and children, are confined on Bhashan Char—a flood-prone, remote island lacking basic infrastructure located off the coast of Bangladesh, where humanitarian agencies do not have access.

In Cox's Bazar, rapidly-expanding barbed-wire fencing around the refugee camps raises serious concerns. Such a perimeter further compromises the camps' humanitarian and civilian character by placing additional restrictions on freedom of movement and affected populations' access to life-saving and life-sustaining services.

Since September 2020, internal clashes between Rohingya groups have left at least eight persons dead and forced hundreds of families to flee their shelters. Due to a lack of access to formal justice and reliance on informal conflict resolution systems, perpetrators are rarely brought to justice and reporting on violence and crimes remains low.

Finally, recently lifted internet and communications restrictions within and near the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have once again been imposed by Bangladeshi authorities, limiting Bangladeshis' and Rohingya's ability to obtain urgent, accurate, life-saving information and contact their families and friends. This also reduces humanitarian actors' ability to listen to concerns and misinformation about COVID-19 in both the Rohingya and host communities and respond with information that is factually based, appropriately communicated, and accessible through trusted channels.

### **Pushback of Boats Carrying Rohingya**

In recent months, Rohingya refugees have been denied safe asylum, and many have died at sea or remain stranded afloat as countries in the Asia-Pacific region pushed back boats. COVID-19 is no excuse for governments to implement policies and practices that discriminate against and stigmatize vulnerable groups, such as refugees, and contravene their obligations under international humanitarian, refugee, and human rights law. Pushing asylum seekers and refugees back to sea is a violation of the principle of *non-refoulement* that exposes Rohingya to the risk of a well-founded fear of persecution and irreparable harm should they be forcibly returned to Myanmar or die at sea.

### **Durable Solutions**

The long-term solution to this humanitarian and human rights crisis rests with the Government of Myanmar. While Rohingya refugees have consistently expressed their desire to return home safely, the Government of Myanmar has yet to demonstrate the creation of conducive conditions for their safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable return—ensuring justice and accountability. For Rohingya who remain in Rakhine, the segregation, discrimination, and violence they face is a stark reminder of the groups' continued persecution in Myanmar.

Regardless of where Rohingya may find themselves, they deserve quality access to age, gender, and disability-sensitive services, including health, education, and legal services delivered in languages and through mechanisms appropriate to the displaced community with full respect for their human rights,

including the principle of *non-refoulement* and their right to safety. Humanitarian agencies must have unfettered access to populations in need and sites of any future potential or planned return within Myanmar to continue to provide critical humanitarian support to Rohingya, other affected populations, and host communities.

It is critical to maintain a sense of hope and stability among Rohingya and strengthen their linkages with local communities to fight the health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and beyond. On both sides of the border, Rohingya are actively supporting the rights and well-being of their families and communities. However, their efforts—particularly the leadership of women—often go unrecognized by those involved in delivering humanitarian assistance and developing political solutions to the crisis. To achieve durable solutions, it is important to prioritize Rohingya views and agency, acknowledging their centrality in the humanitarian response as first responders, decision-makers, and leaders regarding their own community's future and well-being.

**NGO RECOMMENDATIONS TO U.N. MEMBER STATES, THE DONOR COMMUNITY, AND U.N. AGENCIES AND LEADERSHIP:**

**1. Address the root causes of displacement**

- Continue humanitarian and development support for Rohingya within and outside of Myanmar while expanding support for the Rohingya's search for durable and peaceful solutions, fully grounded in recognition of the Rohingya's human rights. Efforts must be redoubled to encourage and support Myanmar to create the conditions necessary for the safe and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees and IDPs through concrete actions—such as lifting restrictions of movement across Rakhine State, facilitating access to durable solutions for IDPs living in camps, restoring citizenship, securing political rights of Rohingya, amending the 1982 Citizenship Law, and ending the National Verification Card (NVC) process in its current form. The Rakhine Advisory Commission recommendations remain a critical blueprint in this regard and should be fully implemented. These measures must be taken while simultaneously pursuing the peaceful end of the conflict in Rakhine State and demonstrating a commitment to international justice and accountability.
- Call on parties to the conflict to adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian, human rights, and refugee law and take proactive measures to prevent civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure during the conduct of hostilities, stop the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated areas and guarantee the rights and meet the needs of survivors, victims, and their families. The production and use of antipersonnel mines and victim-activated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) should be immediately halted.
- Urge the Government of Myanmar and all conflict parties to heed the U.N. Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire to enable efforts to prevent and respond to COVID-19 and protect civilians.

**2. Protect human rights and facilitate durable solutions for Rohingya in the region**

- Urge governments in the region, including those of Bangladesh and Myanmar, to respect and uphold all Rohingya's human rights and respond appropriately to the particular experiences of

boys and girls, women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Emphasize the importance of ensuring full and meaningful participation of all affected communities in search of durable solutions. Refugees, particularly boys and girls, women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, should be at the center of discussions, decisions, and mechanisms that affect their lives and actively shape the response and solutions to the crisis. Practical challenges to participation, such as the language and modality of communications and the means of consultation, must be addressed.

- Engage donors and response leaders by renewing their pledges to support governments in the region, such as Bangladesh, to host Rohingya while upholding their human rights and ensuring their safety, dignity, and well-being in the short and medium-term, as there is little prospect for voluntary, safe, and dignified returns to Myanmar. U.N. member states, the U.N. system, and the NGO community must take a coordinated approach to save lives and fulfill their obligations to protect and assist refugees through search and rescue operations, safe disembarkation, uninterrupted access to humanitarian services, and family reunification as soon as possible. States in the region should urgently agree on collective solutions and better responsibility-sharing arrangements for hosting refugees.
- Urge and work to support the Governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh to immediately re-establish telecommunications channels where they have been cut off or restricted and ensure that affected communities can access the information they want and need related to COVID-19, support refugee children to access online education services, and enable humanitarian efforts to save lives and protect vulnerable communities.
- Urge the Government of Bangladesh to allow more than 300 Rohingya refugees on Bhashan Char island to return to the Cox's Bazar camps. Any further relocation to Bhashan Char must be preceded by a comprehensive technical and protection assessment of the island's safety and feasibility for refugee habitation and humanitarian operations. The Government of Bangladesh should ensure that relocation happens with informed, voluntary consent by Rohingya refugees and in line with international standards.
- Engage the Government of Bangladesh to demonstrate the proportionality of measures, such as the barbed-wire fencing, concerning identified security concerns and assess the impact of such measures on refugees' freedom of movement, access to donor-funded services, and peaceful co-existence with Bangladeshi communities.
- Encourage the Government of Bangladesh to facilitate longer-term programming, including establishing a multiyear JRP targeting the refugees and the immediately affected host communities. In particular, livelihoods programming, which is currently discouraged or not allowed by the Government of Bangladesh, should be authorized and supported, focusing on the most vulnerable population, including women and female-headed households, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. Market-based livelihood interventions would also benefit the host communities and have a positive impact on the local economy. Longer-term programming is also needed to ensure that gender-transformative projects that aim to change social norms and minimize women's vulnerability alongside addressing gender inequalities can be implemented.

**3. *Enable unfettered humanitarian access and provide robust funding to frontline NGOs***

- Support a holistic approach to Rohingya refugee response and host community programming that places priority on integrated protection support. There is an urgent need to restore pre-COVID-19 programming, including essential child protection and gender-based violence services, and expand access to multi-sectoral health support, including maternal and reproductive health care. Reviving efforts to increase refugee access to education and support refugee and host community livelihoods should also be a priority. National and international NGOs play a critical role in delivering quality services—direct and flexible funding to NGOs is essential to maintain services and support efforts to scale up national capacity to deliver life-saving and sustainable assistance.
- Welcoming the fact that the co-hosts’ Press Release indicated that funds raised will partly go to NGOs working to alleviate the crisis in Myanmar and throughout the region, the NGO community would appreciate further details on timelines, criteria, and how NGOs will be meaningfully consulted in the process to ensure prioritization based on impartially assessed humanitarian needs.
- Particularly in the pandemic context, the NGO community advocates for significant increases in funding volume, speedy disbursements to frontline NGO implementers, and greater flexibility of funding, which are critical to ensure continuity of services and sustainable planning.
- NGOs will remain engaged and advocate so that the funds raised bring true additionality through new—rather than repackaged—pledges, including unearmarked and multiyear funding. The co-hosts should also clarify in advance the follow-up mechanism to ensure pledges are transparently allocated and monitored so that progress made can be evaluated and the momentum of solidarity maintained.
- Urge governments in the region to facilitate safe, unimpeded humanitarian access to all areas where people in humanitarian need are located. Humanitarian partners must be able to conduct independent needs assessments and monitoring, the delivery of life-saving assistance, and COVID-19 related activities without undue restrictions and per internationally agreed humanitarian principles. All measures must be taken to ensure that the humanitarian community does not become a target or otherwise arbitrarily restricted while implementing the humanitarian response in the pandemic context.
- Strongly promote the utilization of local resources, including human resources, in the interest of localization. Where insufficient, use all diplomatic means to address barriers—including unnecessary, unclear, or overly burdensome bureaucratic and administrative impediments—to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including rapid processing of visas, work permits, and program agreements (FD7), and steps to address limitations on movement to ensure continued provision of life-saving activities.

The NGO community thanks the Rohingya Conference co-hosts for the opportunity to share collective community views and recommendations and stands prepared to continue to engage with all actors to deliver quality frontline humanitarian assistance to populations in need in the region, including the Rohingya.

## **INGO SIGNATORIES<sup>1</sup>:**

1. Act for Peace
2. Asylum Access
3. CARE
4. Center for Social Integrity
5. Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
6. Finn Church Aid (FCA)
7. Food for the Hungry (FH)
8. Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)
9. Humanity & Inclusion (HI)
10. Jesuit Refugee Service/USA
11. Jesuit Refugee Service South Asia
12. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF)
13. Médecins du Monde France (MdM)
14. Médecins du Monde Japan (MdM)
15. Médecins du Monde Switzerland (MdM)
16. MedGlobal
17. Medical Teams International (MTI)
18. Mixed Migration Center (MMC)
19. Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
20. Seva Foundation
21. Translators without Borders
22. U.S. Council for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)
23. World Vision
24. Anonymous INGO #1<sup>2</sup>
25. Anonymous INGO #2
26. Anonymous INGO #3
27. Anonymous INGO #4

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is accepting INGO signatories on a rolling basis throughout the conference, so this list will be updated regularly. To submit your endorsement, please contact your ICVA or InterAction focal point.

<sup>2</sup> InterAction and ICVA coordinated the drafting and delivery of this statement which has been endorsed by the listed INGOs, as well as the articulated number of INGOs who requested anonymity at this time.