

THE ROHINGYA EXPERIENCE. PRIORITY, PEOPLE RATHER THAN PROJECTS....

The people I interacted with most were actually not primarily the Rohingya refugees themselves, but my international co-workers. In fact, I felt completely relaxed and at home chatting away in a mixture of English, French, German and Bangla (Bengali) with work colleagues; people from multiple nationalities in the UN team in which I worked; in the inter-agency meetings I attended; and in the hotel I stayed for



three months. At breakfast time, I felt comfortable enough to eat alone when I wanted to, combined with other mornings when I would chat with international friends about work issues or the latest World Cup Football scores. The Bangladeshis I came into contact with were UN colleagues; employees with other agencies; and staff at our hotel. The fact that I speak some Bangla (Bengali), even though it was only a jumble of 150 words or so, made many people's faces light up, and was certainly an entry point into local acceptance. There was much to admire about the Bangladeshis themselves, chief of which was their genuine friendliness towards foreigners. There were things about the country which were less agreeable, the worst of these being the absolutely terrible state of driving on the narrow roads (no, don't smile, it was mightily unnerving at times).

Then there were the Rohingya refugees themselves. Around a million of them live in Cox's Bazar District, but you don't see them in the coastal town of this name, as they are largely restricted to the areas surrounding the refugee camps. They are of slim build, like Bangladeshis, and most come from a conservative Muslim background. Their women largely cover their faces, but they take great care in their dresses, and carry themselves with modest dignity. Whilst these families went through a traumatic time when they fled their homes in Myanmar in late 2017, you sense a greater degree of normality now. They are busy getting on with their lives, and, whilst they are not over-effusive, they look you in the eye and are quietly respectful.

So, what were you doing over there, you may ask? I was deployed by an Australian sending agency to one of the main UN organisations for three months as a so-called 'Expert in Mission'. Our agency mandate was to support both the Rohingya themselves and the host community, but my role mainly focused on the former. I represented our organisation on a number of weekly inter-sectoral meetings, and was able to inject some relevant comments relating to disaster risk management (DRM) global best practice. When we had outside visitors, be these senior agency team or potential donors, I was there to also show these around parts of the refugee settlements. I conducted DRM teaching for the largest Bangladeshi NGO, which also plays a major role in the camps, and was also involved in weather-related preparation for both tropical cyclones and monsoonal rains. This latter role included working with technical experts from Bangladesh and Norway to install some

automated rain gauges around the camps. As well as accurately recording detailed rainfall (naturally!), they can be used as tools to help predict potential landslides.

Fairly early on in my mission, I felt a little under-utilised, and shared this with my wife back in Australia. She mentioned that I was not really there to 'save the world' (been there, done that!), but to do the tasks set me, and to additionally put into people lives. Wise words indeed, as in the weeks ahead I was able to interact meaningfully with international friends and colleagues who were going through periods of overwork, tiredness, sickness or frustration – needless to say, this was a two-way process, as some of these also put back into my life.

What made the experience particularly memorable was that we were all playing a small role into contributing to something much greater than our own individual efforts. Around 700,00 refugees had crossed into Bangladesh last year, and, with others who had lived here earlier, there are now over 900,00 Rohingya living across 27 camps. The largest of these, Kutupalong, is around 600,000, which makes it in effect a small city. The camps face enormous challenges. There are severe restrictions on available space for everything, as well as limitations on the types of structures which can be constructed. The main camp was built on undulating previously forested national park, but the trees and vegetation have all been stripped away, revealing the fragile nature of the underlying soft sandstone geology. With the monsoon rains having now arrived, these lasting until early September, there is the increasing risk of adversity caused by flooding and landslides. On top of that, preparations will need to be revisited for the next two monthly cyclone season which commences in October.

Many of the refugees would prefer to return to their homes in Myanmar, and indeed there are diplomatic enactments in place to this effect. This will only realistically occur however, when there are iron-clad agreements which can guarantee their ongoing safety there and the re-establishment of sustainable livelihoods. There is thus some current angst among the refugees, both about their future return home, but also about other transitional options being considered, one of which is the transfer of some of them to new homes constructed on a protected island closer to the delta area of Bangladesh.

I used to take outside official visitors on a trek deep into the heart of Kutupalong, This was an opportunity for them to see at close hand the Rohingya going about their daily lives; carrying supplies back home; strengthening their shelters; and interacting with each other in the few little markets which have sprung up. The walk is also useful in highlighting the areas which are at particular risk from flooding and landslide. When you reach the centre of the camp, there are evocative panoramic views as you gaze across this refugee mega-city. On one of my visits, I had an intense, almost spiritual, experience. The Rohingya come from a different faith system to my own, but I strongly felt that they were greatly loved by God, and that I should have no problem in also caring for and serving them.

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